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LITERARY SKETCHES

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H. S. SALT

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LITERARY SKETCHES

BY
H. S. SALT.

LONDON:
SWAN SONNENSCHEIN, LOWREY & CO.,
PATERNOSTER SQUARE.
1888.

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CONTENTS.

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PAGE

1. TWO KINDS OF GENIUS . . *Progress*, Nov., 1883. 1
2. SHELLEY AS A TEACHER . . *Temple Bar*, Nov., 1882. 14
3. THE TENNYSONIAN PHILOSOPHY . *To-day*, Feb., 1884. 39
4. THE WORKS OF JAMES THOMSON ("B.V.") *The Gentleman's Magazine*, June, 1886. 59
5. ON CERTAIN LYRIC POETS, AND THEIR CRITICS. *Temple Bar*, Jan., 1883. 93
6. EDGAR POE'S WRITINGS . . *Progress*, July, 1887. 104
7. HENRY D. THOREAU . . *Temple Bar*, Nov., 1886. 124
8. WILLIAM GODWIN . . . *To-day*, July, 1887. 167
9. NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S ROMANCES *Progress*, Sept., 1887. 189
10. SOME THOUGHTS ON DE QUINCEY . *Time*, Oct., 1887. 208

Two Kinds of Genius.

To attempt to subject a quality so mysterious and variable as genius to any systematic arrangement or precise definition would be, at the best, a hopeless and foolish endeavour. But, apart from any such arbitrary classification, there are two main divisions of genius, apparent to everyone who considers the question thoughtfully, which have always played an important part in the history of the world. On the one hand, there are the warm-hearted, sympathetic lovers of mankind, who are inspired with a generous impatience of the injustice and misery with which the world is filled, and devote themselves to helping their fellow-creatures by some special teaching and example. On the other hand, there are the calm, philosophical minds, which take a widely intellectual and passionless

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of things, by denouncing with their utmost force and passion the cause of the injustice. They dwell rather on the enormity of the evil than on its intermixture with good; they are moralists rather than artists; philanthropists rather than philosophers; originators or advocates of one special system rather than observers of mankind as a whole; possessed of intense enthusiasm for one great idea, but perhaps for that very reason unable to take a widely tolerant and appreciative view of all ranks and classes of society. This burning zeal for mankind, this eager desire to right the wrong, has appeared at all times and in many varieties of character. It was in this spirit that the ancient Jewish prophets uttered their fierce denunciations of present evil and promises of future good. It was not part of their mission to study nicely the characters of the offenders to whom they were sent; they were not commanded to weigh and ponder and suspend judgment, but to denounce, startle, and overawe. So also with the founders of religious sects and communities: in their earnest proclamations of a new belief, it is no wonder if they have sometimes done scant justice to former institutions. The early propagators of the Christian religion, whose whole attention was absorbed in the new and glorious truths which they were proclaiming to the world, had

little inclination to study philosophically the old pagan creeds. When Mahomet, in his turn, arose to sweep away the errors and ambiguities that had crept into the Eastern Church, and to establish a simpler faith, he felt it no part of his duty to discriminate minutely between the various sects of his opponents. Again, when in later ages Luther rebelled against the monstrous and overgrown tyranny of Rome, he could not calmly set himself to discover what truths, or fragments of truths, might yet lurk in the very superstitions which he cast off; had he striven only to form an unbiassed judgment of the papal authority, the world might have been the richer by a great critical or theological work, but it would have missed the Reformation. And, lastly, in the great humanitarian movement of still later times, it cannot be doubted that the men who led the way to the abolition of torture, slavery, and many other forms of civil and religious oppression from which the civilised world has not long been released, were animated less by a calm judicial spirit and dramatic insight into the general character of the age, than by a fiery impatience of the evils with which the world was infested, and a conviction that those evils were unnecessary and eradicable,

The merits and demerits, the advantages and disadvantages, of this class of character are

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almost inevitable, shortcomings of all enthusiasts, and this is the penalty which they are condemned to pay for them in the opinion of ordinary people. Let us now turn to consider the other, the philosophic, class of character.

To some minds it will always appear irrational and unfair to draw a hard-and-fast line between what is commendable and what is blameworthy, in a world where the good and evil are so strangely blended and intermixed. All must alike deplore the evil, and all alike desire the good ; but we must exercise a wise tolerance in extirpating the one and a wise patience in promoting the other. To root up violently the tares from among the wheat may do more injury than to let both grow together awhile. There are many who believe that the man who by life-long experience, and study of all phases of life and every variety of character, is able to give to the world some great artistic work, some faithful copy of life, true to nature in the humblest details, does far greater service to mankind than those whose over-eager anticipation of the good warps their minds and narrows their intellectual vision. To such thinkers as these the true teachers and reformers of mankind will always appear to be those great objective poets and many-sided philosophers who have taken this wide and tolerant view of life, and who are able to sympathise with every system and form of

human thought without any expression of personal adherence or dissent. What can be more liberal, more comprehensive, more world-wide, than the poetry of Homer? In him there is no passion, no bias, no partiality, no half-views of things; his spirit is large and patient as the spirit of nature herself. The words of Carlyle about nature might be applied also to these great natural poets:

"We are to remember what an umpire nature is; what a greatness, composure of depth and tolerance there is in her. You take wheat to cast into the earth's bosom; your wheat may be mixed with chaff, chopped straw, barn sweepings, dust, and all imaginable rubbish; no matter: you cast it into the kind just earth; she grows the wheat—the whole rubbish she silently absorbs, shrouds it in, says nothing of the rubbish. The yellow wheat is growing there; the good earth is silent about the rest—has silently turned all the rest to some benefit too, and makes no complaint about it! So everywhere in nature! She is true and not a lie; and yet so great, and just, and motherly in her truth."*

And if this is true of Homer, still more is it true of the greatest of all poets, Shakspere; the secret of whose strength is the knowledge that there is a soul of goodness in things evil. "He seems to have been sent," says Mr. Ruskin, in his estimate of Shakspere's genius,† "essentially to take universal and equal grasp of the human nature; and to have been far removed therefore

* *On Heroes*, chap. ii. † *Modern Painters*, vol. iv., p. 372.

from all influences which could in the least warp or bias his thoughts. It was necessary that he should lean *no* way; that he should contemplate with absolute equality of judgment the life of the court, cloister, and tavern, and be able to sympathise so completely with all creatures as to deprive himself, together with his personal identity, even of his conscience, as he casts himself into their hearts. . . . Not for him the founding of institutions, the preaching of doctrines, or the repression of abuses."

I have mentioned the greatest only, but in addition to these many others might be cited as illustrations of the same calm judicial spirit and intellectual strength, all of them artists rather than moralists, yet surely to those who feel with them none the less excellent teachers of morality.

Yet this philosophical kind of genius, no less than the more impassioned spirit of humanitarian reformers, has its own special shortcomings and imperfections. It cannot, indeed, be accused of intellectual narrow-mindedness or religious fanaticism; nor can we suppose that men of this stamp had not well considered the deepest problems of life, because they were not carried away by personal predilection and enthusiasm; but it may, to some extent, lie open to the suspicion of coldness and indifference to human suffering. If it be true that inhumanity, tyranny,

and injustice have been amended by the unceasing protests and earnest endeavours of reformers and philanthropists, and if we unite in praising those who have abolished these evils, how can we consistently and entirely applaud the equanimity of those writers who have ignored them? While there is so much real evil in the world, it seems impossible to maintain an attitude of calm impartiality without sacrificing some of the noblest moral sympathies to the maintenance of the dramatic proprieties. Was there no suffering in Homer's time? And must not those who read between the lines of the Odyssey and Iliad suspect that, in these faithful pictures of an early stage of society, distance often lends some of the enchantment to the view? We praise Chaucer for his wide human sympathies and tolerant spirit, and the genial pictures he draws of national life; but was the picture entirely a complete one? Langland's poem, *Piers the Plowman*, is a terrible witness to the fact that in the midst of all that tale-telling and merriment, there was even then a skeleton in the cupboard in the form of deep suffering and discontent among the down-trodden peasant population. Shakspere is, in the main, well content with his country, "This blessed spot, this earth, this realm, this England;" yet we can see from *Utopia*, that, in the opinion of a thinker no less profound than Sir Thomas More, the

state of "this other Eden, demi-paradise," was very far from being entirely blissful in the sixteenth century. "Is not this," he says, "an unjust and unkynde publyque weale, whyche gyveth fees and rewardes to gentlemen, as they call them, and to gold-smythes, and to each other, whiche be either ydle persones, or els onlye flatterers and devysers of vague pleasures: and of the contrary parte maketh no gentle provision for poor plowmen, coliars, laborers, carters, yron-smythes, and carpenters, without whome no common wealthe can continewe?" *

Again, if we look at the present century, we shall see the same defects in the characters of modern objective writers, such as Goethe, Scott, Browning; and this will become more apparent if we contrast them with writers of the opposite type, such as Hugo, Shelley, Swinburne. If we recognise in Goethe the leading intellectual figure of this century, it must not blind our eyes to the fact that he is deficient in those emotional and sympathetic qualities which constitute precisely the strength of Victor Hugo. If we praise Scott for his close grasp of facts and objective realities, we must remember also that he had not a spark of that fiery enthusiasm for suffering humanity which is Shelley's noblest characteristic. Among poets of our own day

* "Utopia." Robinson's translation.

we must undoubtedly give the palm to Mr. Browning for great dramatic power and wide intellectual scope. Yet he cannot claim the honour of having lent to the cause of liberty and religious freedom such sympathy and assistance as was given by the more impassioned lyric inspiration of Mr. Swinburne's *Songs Before Sunrise.*

It is important also to notice, as I said before, that every thoughtful man leans naturally to one or the other of these great lines of thought; for, though it is only by real genius that great ideas are originated and expressed, yet the realisation of such ideas, or at least the full recognition of their author's merits, is often due to the efforts of less gifted men, who are drawn to this or that theory which is more congenial with their own natural inclination.

And thus it happens that while the virtues of great men of the philanthropic or philosophic stamp are often unduly extolled by their respective admirers, their faults are as often unduly exaggerated by those of the contrary persuasion. To the sober-minded adherents of the more practical and observant school there often seems to be little else in the passionate utterances of reformers than shallow enthusiasm and theatrical declamation. In like manner the grave impartiality and quiet self-control of the philosophic thinkers is often miscon-

strued by those who differ from them, into mere callousness or indifference. In short, each of these two kinds of genius has its own deficiencies and imperfections, no less than its advantages.

It is an error, however, to suppose that they are necessarily antagonistic or contradictory; we are not driven to the alternative of pronouncing one to be true and the other false. It is far wiser to suppose that both are true, as far as they go, though they view life from different standpoints, and neither in itself can fully satisfy the understanding. They each tell the truth, and nothing but the truth; but to know the whole truth it is necessary to learn the double lesson of their united teaching. The world is full of grievous injustice, which is from time to time redressed and righted by the genius of some great reformer who devotes his life-work to the service of his fellow-men. All that he teaches, however burning his enthusiasm and zeal, is in itself true and just; but in the very enthusiasm with which he is inspired there lies a new danger, the danger of forgetting that the evil was not all evil, but was interwoven and mingled with good. Hence it is of the utmost importance to keep before our eyes a wider and clearer, though perhaps colder and less enthusiastic, view of life and society; and this is done by those who show us a more complete and faith-

fully drawn picture of society. Thus a balance is kept between the two extremes, and while each kind of genius becomes, as it were, supple mentary to the other, their united result is a solid gain for the progress and happiness of mankind.

Shelley as a Teacher.

It is the object of this paper to exhibit Shelley in the character of teacher rather than poet. His poetical fame is now almost universally acknowledged, but many of his admirers are content to pass lightly over the matter of his teaching, as though it were erroneous or unimportant; even Mr. Symonds, in his otherwise appreciative review,* comes to the conclusion that the real lesson of his life and writings "is not to be sought in any of his doctrines, but rather in his fearless bearing, his resolute loyalty to an unselfish and in the simplest sense benevolent ideal." My desire is to show that this is an under-estimate of the importance of Shelley's doctrines, which, under one form or another, seem to be destined to play an important part in determining the course of thought, and therefore cannot be so lightly dismissed. It is perhaps natural enough

* "English Men of Letters."

that such impassioned utterances as those of Shelley should have met with scanty appreciation. The sublime, we know, always borders on the ridiculous; and in estimating such a character it is often difficult, as in the case of Swedenborg, to draw the line between enthusiasm and hallucination. But when enthusiasm is guided and tempered by the powers of calm and sober reason, there results from this union the most beautiful of all human characters. So it was with Shelley, whose intellect was in truth eminently keen and powerful, notwithstanding the assertion, so often made, that he was a weak thinker. All his biographers bear witness to the fact that he was a profound and subtle disputant, and very far from being the mere wild singer and visionary that some would now wish him to appear. This is well expressed by Dr. Garnett in his essay on Shelley: *

"We must learn to think of Shelley not merely as gentle, dreamy, unworldly, imprudently disinterested, and ideally optimistic—though he was all this—but likewise as swift, prompt, resolute, irascible, strong-limbed, and hardy, often very practical in his views of politics, and endowed with preternatural keeness of observation."

This being so, it is strange that we should set such high value on his purely literary work,

* "Fortnightly Review," 1878.

while we scarcely pause to examine the great idea by which nearly all his poems are inspired. His life-work was devoted to one clear and definite end, which he kept steadily before his eyes, and followed with singular firmness and consistency. As he himself tells us in the introduction to *Prometheus Unbound*, he had "a passion for reforming the world." This reformation was to be affected not by bloodshed and civil strife, but by the gentler and surer process of argument and education. It was by his poems that he hoped to carry out the divine mission with which he was entrusted. He says in the preface to *The Revolt of Islam*: "I have sought to enlist the harmony of metrical language, the etherial combinations of the fancy . . . in the cause of a liberal and comprehensive morality." Thus, like a second Lucretius, he proposed to sweeten his doctrine with the honey of melodious rhythm and beautiful imagery. But it should always be remembered that his primary object was to teach and persuade, and that his poetry was for the most part employed only to effect this result.

There is a singular consistency between Shelley's life and writings. In early boyhood he solemnly dedicated himself to his task of philanthropy and reformation, and throughout his lifetime all his intellectual powers were devoted

to this end. In the opening stanzas of *The Revolt of Islam* he thus describes the first awakening to the new life:

"I do remember well the hour which burst
My spirit's sleep: a fresh May dawn it was
When I walked forth upon the glittering grass,
And wept, I knew not why; until there rose
From the near schoolroom voices that, alas!
Were but one echo from a world of woes—
The harsh and grating strife of tyrants and of foes.

And then I clasped my hands, and looked around,
But none was near to mock my streaming eyes,
Which poured their warm drops on the sunny ground;
So, without shame, I spake—'I will be wise,
And just, and free, and mild, if in me lies
Such power; for I grow weary to behold
The selfish and the strong still tyrannise
Without reproach or check.' I then controll'd
My tears; my heart grew calm, and I was meek and bold."

The resolution thus earnestly made was conscientiously kept. Some years later, in reviewing his past life, Shelley could truly say in his *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty:*

"I vowed that I would dedicate my powers
To thee and thine: have I not kept my vow?"

This *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* was written shortly after what may be called the close of the first part of Shelley's life. During that period, he seems to have entertained the belief that his theories for the regeneration of

man might be carried into effect even in the present time, and accordingly we find him personally advocating his doctrines with extraordinary pertinacity. He is described in the *Shelley Memorials* as a boyish enthusiast,

> "Whose enthusiasm never wanes, and whose voice is seldom silent; who, with the eloquence of conviction, obtrudes his doctrines at all times; who seeks the youngest daughter in the schoolroom, and the butler in the pantry, to make them converts."

So too at Oxford, brought face to face with the narrow orthodoxy of the College authorities, he could not content himself with a silent disbelief: he would neither conform, nor abstain from proclaiming his non-conformity, and the publication of a pamphlet, entitled *The Necessity of Atheism*, resulted in his expulsion from the University. Then came his first marriage, and his visit to Ireland, made in order to take a practical part in the amelioration of that country. Within a year after this expedition, *Queen Mab* had been written, and the equally remarkable notes to *Queen Mab*, In the meantime, Shelley had put another of his theories into practice, by the adoption of a vegetarian diet.

Looking back over these years, Shelley must indeed have felt that he had conscientiously fulfilled the resolution of his boyhood. Yet he

must have felt also some disappointment at the temporary failure of many cherished plans, for, in spite of all his efforts, there was no visible improvement among mankind. We can hardly doubt that the following words of the *Essay on Love* were written with reference to this time:

> "I know not the internal constitution of other men, not even thine, whom I now address. I see that in some external attributes they resemble me; but when, misled by that appearance, I have thought to appeal to something in common, and unburthen my inmost soul to them, I have found my language misunderstood, like one in a distant and savage land."

These words mark the sense of that loneliness and disappointment and temporary failure which have been felt by every true reformer. But in the second period of Shelley's life, which was mainly spent in Italy, he seems to have looked to the future, and not the present, for the realisation of his schemes. Yet his firm faith in the ultimate triumph of his principles was never for an instant shaken; nor did he relax for an instant his efforts to ameliorate the condition of mankind.

Let us proceed now to a consideration of the religious and moral tendencies of Shelley's teaching. The chief and cardinal doctrines of Shelley's creed is *Love*. And by this is meant love in its most universal sense, something much more than individual affection or philan-

thropic benevolence—love not only of mankind, but of all creation. This love of nature is the central point, both of his religion and morality; his duty to God and duty to man are both alike comprised in this.

And first, as regards Shelley's religious views, I may here remark that the popular opinion which represents him sometimes as an atheist, sometimes as a sceptic, are both equally fallacious. Shelley was no atheist, though in the combative zeal of youth he may have delighted so to style himself: he was rather a pantheist, believing, as we learn from his Adonais, in the all-pervading presence of universal love. With still less truth could he be called a sceptic; since his religious, or anti-religious convictions were fixed, decided, and thoroughly sincere. On this point it is interesting to compare his character with that of Byron, the true sceptic, who had no fixed belief, and little reverence, but "flew about from subject to subject like a will-o'-the-wisp, touching them with a false fire, without throwing any real or steady light on any."* Shelley, on the contrary, had an essentially religious nature, and was filled with profound veneration for the good. Hogg says of him, that "the devotion, the reverence, the religion, with which he was kindled towards all masters of intellect,

* Medwin, ii. 147.

cannot be described, and must be utterly inconceivable to minds less deeply enamoured with the love of wisdom."* We learn from the *Shelley Memorials* that "the more exalted Platonical speculations of his later life made Shelley discontented with the somewhat cold though qualified materialism of *Queen Mab*,"† and about the year 1815 he became an adherent of the immaterial philosophy of Berkeley, who asserted that matter itself is nothing but a perception of the mind. But his great and cardinal belief was undoubtedly in the perfectibility of man, the belief that the good is more potent than the evil, and that man's redemption must be worked out by no external revelation, but by the innate sense of virtue and love. As a rule, he was indifferent to all theological disputes and abstruse questions of religion. He regarded all priestcraft with aversion, and looked forward to the age of intellectual freedom and universal toleration, when, as he says in the *Ode to Liberty*,

> "Human thoughts might kneel alone,
> Each before the judgment throne
> Of its own aweless soul, or of the power unknown."

It is obvious, therefore, that Religion, in the ordinary sense of the word, must hold a far less

* Hogg i. 242.
† Shelley Mem. 54.

important place in Shelley's teaching than Morality, the relation of man to man. It was to "the cause of a liberal and comprehensive morality," that, as I have already remarked, he devoted all his poetical faculties.

There can be no greater mistake than to suppose that Shelley's convictions were merely the result of the thoughtlessness of youth, or the imperfection of education, or, as a Cambridge essayist has surmised, that "if Shelley's honest doubts had been openly and liberally met by those with whom he first came in contact, his after-life might have been very different to that which it actually was."* The fact is, that from the first Shelley was no doubter, honest or dishonest, but was filled with the absorbing conviction that while all religious dogma is false and injurious, man may yet attain to perfection by the light of his own reason and his innate sense of gentleness and love. In this belief Shelley never faltered: it was this that upheld him through all the struggles and sorrows of his life. We must approve or condemn him, according as each shall think right; but the fact remains that this was the secret of his strength.

Turning now to the question of morality, in which Shelley was, for the most part, a pupil of William Godwin, the author of *Political*

* Cambridge Prize Essay, 1877.

Justice, we find that here, as in religion, the sole motive-power of Shelley's creed is Love. Love is the one and only source of those two great qualities, the bulwarks of morality, gentleness and virtue. It is impossible to *prove* to a man that gentleness is better than cruelty, virtue than vice; one can only appeal to that intuitive sense of good, for which Love is the most comprehensive name that can be found. In Shelley's own words: "If a man persists to inquire why he ought to promote the happiness of mankind, he demands a mathematical or metaphysical reason for a moral action."

Love is therefore the origin of all morality, but there is another condition that is inseparable from a perfectly moral state, and that is Freedom—for only those who are free can be entirely and perfectly moral. If we say then that Morality is the child of Love, we must admit that it is the fosterchild of Freedom, for by Freedom only can it attain to maturity and perfection. Accordingly, in Shelley's poems, we everywhere find Love and Liberty celebrated as the saviours of the human race.

The two moral qualities on which Shelley most frequently dwells, and of which his own life affords the most conspicuous example, are those I before mentioned—gentleness and virtue. Gentleness is perhaps more often in-

culcated by Shelley than any other quality. And, rightly understood, it is the chief of all virtues, as cruelty is the chief of all crimes. For gentleness is identical with unselfishness: it is that widely sympathetic spirit that prompts us to injure no living thing. Among individuals true gentleness can only exist in conjunction with simplicity of life, for in exact proportion as a man lives in needless luxury, he causes labour and degradation to his fellow-men, and pain and suffering to the lower animals. For this reason Shelley, the apostle of gentleness, repeatedly insists on the necessity of simplicity of life. In *Epipsychidion* he says:

> "Our simple life wants little, and true taste
> Hires not the pale drudge Luxury to waste
> The scene it would adorn, and therefore still
> Nature, with all her children, haunts the hill."

And again in the *Essay on Christianity*: "The man who has fewest bodily wants approaches nearest to the Divine nature. Satisfy these wants at the cheapest rate, and expend the remaining energies of your nature in the attainment of virtue and knowledge." For the same reason Shelley himself, as all his biographers bear witness, lived with the utmost frugality. Leigh Hunt's account is as follows:

"This was the round of his daily life. He was up early, breakfasted sparingly, wrote this *Revolt of Islam* all the

morning; went out in his boat, or in the woods, with some Greek author or the Bible in his hands; came home to a dinner of vegetables (for he took neither meat nor wine); visited, if necessary, the sick and fatherless, whom others gave Bibles to and no help; wrote or studied again, or read to his wife and friends the whole evening, took a crust of bread, or a glass of whey for his supper, and went early to bed."

Such was his life at Marlow in 1817, and his mode of living in Italy seems to have been equally abstemious. "Bread," says Trelawny, "was literally his staff of life." "Wine," says Medwin, "he never touched with his lips."

But the gentleness which Shelley teaches does not only condemn what is openly cruel or violent; it sanctions nothing that is selfish or uncharitable. There is an *un*gentleness in peaceful as in warlike occupations, and it is not surprising that Shelley should dwell as strongly on the crime of selfishness as seen in modern commerce as on cruelty itself. He says in *Queen Mab.*

"Hence commerce springs, the venal interchange
Of all that human art or nature yield;
Which wealth should purchase not, but want demand,
And natural kindness hasten to supply
From the full fountain of its boundless love."

This may sound Quixotic; yet it is essentially the same lesson as that which Ruskin has taught us that the maxim of the political economist, "to buy in the cheapest market, and

sell in the dearest," is selfish and ungentle. It may be worth while to quote his words : *

"They will find that commerce is an occupation which gentlemen will every day see more need to engage in, rather than in the businesses of talking to men or slaying them: that in true commerce, as in true preaching or true fighting, it is necessary to admit the idea of occasional voluntary loss ; that sixpences have to be lost, as well as lives, uuder a sense of duty."

It was this sense which made Shelley adopt opinions which in the present day would be called socialistic. He repeatedly urges that there is no real wealth except in the labour of man, and that the rich are in reality the pensioners of the poor. The present system of society, he thinks, "must be overthrown from the foundation, with all its superstructure of maxims and forms." Like Godwin, however, he trusted that this revolution might be brought about without violence or bloodshed by the spread of enlightenment and gentleness.

Virtue, according to Shelley's doctrine, must be based solely on natural purity of heart. There must be no restraint ; no fear ; no consideration of conventional propriety ; no hope of reward, either in this world or the next ; for an action is only virtuous when it is freely and spontaneously performed. In his *Essay on Christianity*, Shelley strongly enforces the

* *Unto this Last*, p. 30.

principle that virtue is its own reward, and that it must be independent even of the hope of immortality. Commenting on the words, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God," he thus explains the latter expression:

"Whosoever is free from the contamination of luxury and licence, may go forth to the fields and woods, inhaling joyous renovation from the breath of spring, or catching from the odour and sounds of autumn some diviner mood of sweetest sadness, which improves the softened heart; whosoever is no deceiver or destroyer of his fellow-men—no liar, no flatterer, no murderer—may walk among his species, deriving, from the communion with all which they contain of beautiful or of majestic, some intercourse with the universal God. Whosoever has maintained with his own heart the strictest correspondence of confidence, who dares to examine and to estimate every imagination which suggests itself to his mind, whosoever is that which he designs to become, and only aspires to that which the divinity of his own nature shall consider and approve—he has already seen God."

Shelley's life was consistently in accord with his writings, and through all his career he invariably strove to practise what he preached. In one point only has the virtue of his life been seriously questioned, and that is on the question of marriage. On this subject he held that all legal constraint is foolish and immoral, and he undoubtedly held this opinion in perfect honesty and consistency. It will be sufficient to quote his own words from the notes to *Queen Mab*: "Love is inevitably consequent on the per-

ception of loveliness : its very essence is liberty : it is compatible neither with obedience, jealousy, nor fear : it is then most pure, perfect, and unlimited, when its votaries live in confidence, equality, and unreserve." I am aware that in after-years Shelley refused to be held responsible for the theories advanced in *Queen Mab*, which was published without his consent ; but there is no reason to suppose that he ever changed his opinion on the question of the marriage-law. It was formerly thought to be a sufficient condemnation of Shelley's views, to point to the unhappy results of his first marriage. But the publication of Professor Dowden's *Life of Shelley* has now given us for the first time a reliable account of that portion of Shelley's career, and the evidence which he adduces, though by no means with the object of exculpating Shelley from all blame, must at least have the effect of relieving him of the charge of having "deserted" his wife, or having been in any way responsible for her death.

Gentleness and virtue are, therefore, the two qualities which, according to Shelley's teaching, are inseparable from a moral state. But, as I said before, true morality can only be developed under favourable conditions, and of these liberty is the chief. In the *Ode to Liberty*, it is liberty that is described as bringing wisdom "from the inmost cave of man's deep spirit." There is

probably no writer who has advocated liberty so passionately as Shelley ; and his theories are in consequence generally regarded as dangerous and pernicious, or at best as the wild ravings of a mere visionary and enthusiast. Yet it should be remarked that in his strongest invectives against kings and priests he never admits the idea of vengeance or persecution : his doctrine is always to overcome evil with good ; liberty is to be gained not by violence but endurance. He simply advocates the principle of universal toleration.

On the subject of civil liberty, and the right method of obtaining it, his views find their fullest expression in *The Masque of Anarchy*, where he calls upon the English people to overcome the violence of their oppressors by passive and indomitable endurance.

> "Let a great assembly be,
> Of the fearless and the free,
> On some spot of English ground,
> Where the plains stretch wide around.
>
> . . .
>
> And if then the tyrants dare,
> Let them ride among you there,
> Slash and stab and maim and hew;
> What they like, that let them do.
>
> . . .
>
> And that slaughter to the nation
> Shall steam up like inspiration;
> Eloquent, oracular;
> A volcano heard afar."

Such was Shelley's theory of passive protest· The only occasion on which he took any practical part in political matters was when he visited Ireland in 1812, and published his *Address to the Irish People* and other documents. As might have been expected, his visit was a failure in its immediate consequences; but his address is in itself very remarkable for its sagacity and moderation. Indeed, as Mr. Symonds remarks, "Catholic emancipation has since been brought about by the very measure he proposed, and under the conditions he foresaw.'

In foreign policy Shelley was an equally ardent champion of oppressed nations, and has left in *Hellas* a splendid memorial of his love for Greece. Here, too, time has shown the wisdom of his views, as will appear from the following passage in the preface to *Hellas*:

> "Russia desires to possess, not to liberate Greece; and is contented to see the Turks, its natural enemies, and the Greeks, its intended slaves, enfeeble each other, until one or both fall into its net. The wise and generous policy of England would have consisted in establishing the independence of Greece, and in maintaining it against both Russia and the Turks."

But the kind of liberty which Shelley most eloquently and urgently advocates is of course freedom of thought. He is never weary of declaiming against religious intolerance and the tyranny of social custom. These views find

their most impassioned expression in the *Ode to Liberty*, and are worked out at greater length in *The Revolt of Islam* and *Prometheus Unbound.* In all fiction there is scarcely a sublimer conception than Shelley's Prometheus. In some respects he resembles the Satan of *Paradise Lost*, and the Titans of Keats' *Hyperion*, but the difference is still more striking. In these we see the shadowy forms of great and colossal heroes, who in their fallen state still cherish lofty aspirations, though wild regret and frantic indignation are now uppermost in their minds. Prometheus, on the contrary, is calm and passionless ; his subjection is only temporary, and he is upheld through all his sufferings by a serene and fearless expectation of his ultimate triumph. In him we see a picture of the eternal struggle of right against might, and in this poem Shelley's ideal principle reaches its highest development. Prometheus, the representative of liberty and gentleness, ceaselessly struggling against Jupiter, the representative of despotism and cruelty, is the very incarnation of all that Shelley ever thought, or said, or did.

Such, in the barest outline, are the main features of Shelley's teaching. His opinions will doubtless appear to many to be a strange mass of wild, though philanthropic speculation, and it must be admitted that he looks less at what is practically and immediately attainable than

at what is positively just. Yet there are many also in whose opinion a creed such as this is destined to play a most important part in the future of the world, standing as it does between the two extremes of superstition and materialism. It is not unfrequently said that there is no consistent resting-place between these two, and that men's choice must ultimately lie between the ancient religious dogma, on the one side, with all its treasury of fears and hopes, and modern scepticism, on the other, with its cold and passionless system, incapable alike of hope or fear. There are some, however, who will not accept this dilemma, but believe that the future of the world belongs rather to this Shelleyan idealism, which possesses the strength of both creeds and the weakness of neither. It is wholly free from the taint of superstition, while it possesses love and enthusiasm, which supply the only worthy motive for morality, and are a continual source of thankfulness and joy. Again, it can boast the perfect freedom of thought which is the glory of modern science, while it is free from the sad and joyless spirit, which is hardly separable from a state of real scepticism. In this belief alone can be found the complete union of morality and reason : here alone can be found the perfect religion of love. There is a memorable passage in the *Shelley Memorials*, where we read that when Shelley visited the

cathedral at Pisa, in company with Leigh Hunt,

"the noble music of the organ deeply affected Shelley, who warmly assented to a remark of Leigh Hunt's, that a divine religion might be found out, if charity were really made the principle of it, instead of faith."

To end as I began, I will repeat that love is the chief and cardinal doctrine of Shelley's creed, and through love is to be wrought out the perfection of the human race. It is easy to brand such theories with the epithets "sentimental" and "Utopian." Yet, after all, there is not much to be proud of in the belief that the human race is incapable of a regeneration which has seemed possible to its most enthusiastic children. If it be a fact that the perfectibility of man is a mere dream, we should accept such a conclusion with sober and saddened hearts, and at least refrain from railing at those whose utmost crime it has been to think too well of their fellow-creatures. The philanthropic doctrines which Shelley advances are only impracticable in this strictly limited sense, that men at present are not sufficiently unselfish to practise them. We have, however, no right to conclude beforehand that future generations will be equally incapable of reformation. Time may yet prove the truth of Shelley's lines:

"We might be otherwise; we might be all
We dream of; happy, high, majestical."

Having now considered the general moral tendencies of Shelley's teaching, it remains for me to say a few words about the manner in which that teaching was expressed. To an enthusiast such as Shelley, literary style must in itself have appeared a matter of secondary importance; and I need only notice here one or two salient points in which his manner of writing was directly influenced by the leading purpose of his life. Owing to his enthusiastic devotion to one great idea, the composition of most of his poems is less finished and artistic than would otherwise have been the case, herein differing widely from that of Keats, whose mind, undisturbed and undivided by strong religious or political sympathies, was at leisure to dwell entirely on what is beautiful and calm. Shelley's sentences, on the contrary, are not carefully weighed and polished and refined, but are poured forth, like the song of his own skylark, "in profuse strains of unpremeditated art." He is too eager about the matter of his teaching to be greatly concerned as to the precise method of conveying it.

There is another noticeable defect in Shelley's writings, this too caused by his intense seriousness and absorbing devotion to his cause. His nature was by no means deficient in humour, as may be seen from his satire on Wordsworth in *Peter Bell the Third*, and from other poems of

a similar vein. But the humour, though not absent, was often latent and forgotten, and this prevented his seeing the frailties of his fellow-men from any but the saddest side. His characters have great virtues or great vices, but they have no small foibles or eccentricities : he weeps at the littleness of human nature, but he cannot smile. He has none of the playful yet sympathetic humour which could draw such characters as Sir Roger de Coverley or Colonel Newcome. But these faults, if faults they be, are after all insignificant when compared with the immense benefits which Shelley derived from his firm faith and unswerving devotion. It was this faith alone that could inspire him with that wonderful energy and inexhaustible flow of language which make him unique among our poets, and caused Lord Macaulay to write of him as follows: "The words *bard* and *inspiration*, which seem so cold and affected when applied to other modern writers, have a perfect propriety when applied to him. He was not an author, but a bard. His poetry seems not to have been an art, but an inspiration."

It should be remembered, too, that in spite of these artistic defects in his didactic works, Shelley has left poems which, even from an artistic point of view, are scarcely inferior to anything in our language. "Not only did he write the best lyrics, but the best tragedy, the

best translations, and the best familiar poems of his century." So says his biographer in 'English Men of Letters,' and there is certainly no exaggeration in the remark. Such high lyrical inspiration has never yet been united with such high artistic skill, as in the *Ode to the West Wind*, the *Question*, the *Ode to Liberty*, and a host of other odes and songs which I need not here enumerate. Again though Shelley cannot be called a great dramatist, yet *The Cenci* is undoubtedly one of our greatest dramas; from beginning to end a masterpiece of artistic perfection; a marvel of objective writing by the most subjective of poets. The *Adonais*, too, is a model of consummate art; Keats himself has left us nothing more faultlessly and symmetrically beautiful than this. These two poems alone are sufficient to prove that there is no natural or inherent artistic blemish in Shelley's work. But, writing in the full fervour of poetical inspiration, he for the most part could not pause to elaborate and refine. It was better that his poems should bear the stamp of genuine and passionate conviction, than that they should be free from faults of detail in their style and workmanship.

And, lastly, a word about Shelley himself. He had several characteristics that have endeared him to many readers beyond all other poets of his generation. His beauty and youth;

the freshness and simplicity of his life; his womanly purity of mind; his unselfishness and high devotion to his cause; all these have conspired to invest his memory with a peculiar charm. We look back to him with something more than ordinary veneration and hero-worship; the least reminiscence of him is precious; there is something almost startling in the fact that persons lately living had seen and conversed with him. Of whom else could it have been written as in Mr. Browning's *Memorabilia?*

> "Ah, did you once see Shelley plain,
> And did he stop and speak to you,
> And did you speak to him again?
> How strange it seems and new!"

A reminiscence of Shelley is, indeed, as Mr. Browning describes it, as it were a moulted eagle-feather fallen upon the blank and barren moorland of ordinary life. Still more beautiful and reverential is the tribute paid to Shelley's memory by the late James Thomson ("B.V") a writer who himself inherited no small share of Shelley's rhythmic melody and rapturous inspiration. It is from his privately published poem on *Shelley* that the following stanzas are taken:

> "A voice of right amidst a world gone wrong,
> A voice of hope amidst a world's despair,
> A voice instinct with such melodious song

As hardly until then had thrilled the air
Of this gross underworld wherein we fare
With heavenly inspirations, too divine
For souls besotted with earth's sensual wine.

All powers and virtues that ennoble men—
The hero's courage and the martyrs' truth,
The saint's white purity, the prophet's ken,
The high unworldliness of ardent youth,
The poet's rapture, the apostle's ruth,
Informed the Song; whose theme all themes above
Was still the sole supremacy of Love."

The Tennysonian Philosophy.

It is interesting to contrast the present reputation of a great poet with the hostile criticism to which he was subjected during his previous career. Since the time when Coleridge declared that he "could scarcely scan" some of Tennyson's verses, full fifty years have passed by, and the Poet Laureate has now obtained a literary eminence and wide-spread popularity such as probably no poet has ever enjoyed in his own lifetime. Almost every line that he now writes is greeted with universal applause, and the unsparing severity of former criticism has been succeeded by the almost servile adulation of a later age.

Lord Tennyson's claim to be the first poet of our time is generally based on the ground that he is the representative singer of the generation in which he lives, and that he has appreciated and expressed in his writings, more faithfully

and more delicately than any other poet, the thoughts and feelings of his fellow-countrymen. He stands before us less in the light of a great teacher than a great singer ; and if the soundness of his philosophical views be at any time called in question, his admirers generally are ready with the answer that the true function of the poet is not to instruct, but to please ; not to lead, but to represent the age in which he lives. This may or may not be true as regards the duty of poets in general, but it certainly is not the course that has been followed by Lord Tennyson; it is not the view that he himself has taken of his own duties and capabilities. It would have been better for him and for all of us if he had thought it well to follow the wise example of Gray, and Collins, and Keats, and restrict himself to that art of poetry in which he has so few rivals. For if ever a poet has come near to perfection in his work, Lord Tennyson has done so in those poems where a great but simple thought had to be expressed, and where was no room for the introduction of any controversial matter. For example, in *Ulysses* we have a splendid representation of the indomitable energy of the will ; in the *Lotos Eaters* of rest ; in *St. Agnes' Eve*, of purity and resignation ; in *Rizpah*, of horror, and pity, and love. But, unfortunately, the Poet Laureate was not content with this simplicity of subject ; he has deliberately descend-

ed into the arena of strife, and must be judged accordingly. Indeed, it was so obviously useless to attempt to exonerate him from this criticism that his earlier and more enthusiastic admirers boldly took the bull by the horns and claimed for him the position of a great teacher and thinker.* It will be found, I fear, that his thoughts, when sifted, are light as chaff, and that his philosophical system is a mixture of opportunism and shallow optimist theories. In his delightful poem of *Will Waterproof's Lyrical Monologue*, he has described the process of his own poetic inspiration, and the influence of his Muse:

> "Until the charm have power to make
> New life-blood warm the bosom,
> And barren common-places break
> In full and kindly blossom."

One could hardly desire a more correct description of Lord Tennyson's poetical philosophy. It is expressed in language of the fullest and kindliest blossom; but the common-places of his thought will be found on investigation to be very barren indeed.

Let us now proceed to consider the tendency of the Poet Laureate's teaching on questions of religion, morality, and politics. Lord Tennyson is often claimed as an ally by the orthodox

* *Three Great Teachers of our Age*, Smith and Elder, 1865.

church party; but it may be doubted whether he is at heart a very sound champion of the faith, at any rate on the question of the truth of Christian dogma. It should be noticed that on this subject the assistance he has given to orthodox belief has been less by any outspoken avowal than by hints and suggestions, which imply a sympathetic feeling, but are no guarantee of personal adherence, He gives the Christian the advantage, so to speak, of the best position in his poems; he loves to throw a favourable light on the orthodox portions of the picture and an unfavourable light on the reverse; and thus in an indirect way he has undoubtedly done service to the church. But his attitude is always such as to suggest the idea that he believes Christian doctrine must be upheld less for its own inherent truth, than because it is bound up with some external advantage to mankind. As an instance of this indirect approval, we may refer to the passage in *The Two Voices*, where the speaker, after long hesitation between the advantages of death or life, is cheered by the sweet and balmy airs of a lovely Sabbath morning.

> "Like softened winds that blowing steal,
> When meres begin to uncongeal,
> The sweet church bells began to peal.
>
> On to God's house the people prest:
> Passing the place where each must rest,
> Each entered like a welcome guest."

The sight of this solemn scene rescues the would-be suicide from the gloomy depths of his despair. It is a slight touch, but it is characteristic of Lord Tennyson's narrow and partial delineations of human nature.

Other examples will readily occur to the mind; perhaps the most striking is to be found in one of his later poems, *In the Children's Hospital.* There, among various characters, we have a description of a terrible doctor, with red hair, big voice, big merciless hands, fresh from the surgery-schools of France, and addicted to the worst practices of vivisection, who roughly informs the hospital nurse that one of the children under her charge is dying and will need no more of her care. When she timidly suggests that there is the more need "to seek the Lord Jesus in prayer," he treats her with brutal scorn;

> "Then he muttered half to himself, but I know what I heard him say
> 'All very well—but the good Lord Jesus has had his day.'"

In this passage Lord Tennyson has deliberately gone out of his way to couple disbelief with roughness and brutality, and I cannot imagine anything more disingenuous than to draw a picture which may conceivably be true in itself, but is calculated to suggest an absolutely erroneous inference to the mind. There may be doctors like the one described, devoid of all

gentleness and humanity; but it is not their belief or disbelief that has made them so. Gentleness is not an invariable concomitant of Christianity any more than of scepticism.

We shall come to still worse instances by-and-bye on other questions, but this is no unfair example of the illogical and indirect aid which the Poet Laureate renders now and again to the church party on the subject of Christianity. He never meets the unbeliever face to face as an avowed opponent, but he sneaks behind him and trips him up unawares, or gives him a foul blow "below the belt," while posing all the time as the impartial and philosophical by-stander who wrote those famous lines (but that was many a year ago),

> "There lives more faith in honest doubt,
> Believe me, than in half the creeds."

Such is Lord Tennyson's attitude with regard to Christianity. But there is another question in which he has taken a far more pronounced part, and has shown himself more and more intolerant and dogmatic in his advancing age; though, unfortunately, here also he has adopted that circuitous and illogical method which I have just noticed. The immortality of the soul is not merely the cardinal belief of the Poet Laureate's philosophy—in that he would be at one with many of the best and noblest teachers

of mankind; but it is the *sine quâ non* of his morality, the condition without which life is worthless, the criterion by which he passes immutable judgment on the characters of his fellow-men. To illustrate this it will be necessary to touch briefly on three or four of his poems, and first on *In Memoriam*, the tenderest and noblest of all his works. It is worthy of remark that in this poem, where he himself felt most deeply, he is least intolerant of the opinion of others. As he himself says :—

> "If these brief lays, of sorrow born,
> Were taken to be such as closed
> Grave doubts and answers here proposed,
> Then these were such as men might scorn."

This is a true and sensible estimate of the philosophical value not only of *In Memoriam*, but of all Lord Tennyson's poetry ; and had this wise thought been kept in remembrance such a poem as *Despair* would never have been written, and that ill-starred drama *The Promise of May* would never have made its brief appearance on the stage. But even in *In Memoriam*, tender and beautiful as the poem is, we may discover the germs of that fatal fallacy, lately developed to the full in the Poet Laureate's philosophy, that happiness and morality in this present life are dependent on a belief in a future existence.

> "Not only cunning casts in clay:
> Let Science prove we are, and then

What matters Science unto men—
At least, to me? *I would not stay.*

Let him, the wiser man, who springs
Hereafter, up from childhood shape
His action like the greater ape,
But I was born to other things."

Passing over this astounding misrepresentation of the theory of evolution, let the reader note well the extraordinary idea of "*not staying;*" for therein is struck the key-note of much of the Tennysonian philosophy. It is indeed sad that a great writer should lend his sanction to the foolish clamour, so often raised by those who cling desperately to some particular form of belief, that unless their special doctrine be true, life would no longer be worth living, and the call of duty would no longer fall with authority on our ears. How different from this cuckoo-cry are the noble words of Frederick Robertson, himself a far firmer believer than Lord Tennyson: —

"If there be no God and no future state, yet, even then, it is better to be generous than selfish, better to be true than false, better to be brave than to be a coward. Blessed beyond all earthly blessedness is the man who, in the tempestuous darkness of the soul, has dared to hold fast to these venerable landmarks." *

This, however, is not the opinion of the Poet

* Address to Brighton working men.

Laureate. With him there must be a sure belief in futurity, or there can be no action in the present. Virtue is not her own reward, as we have lately been taught by some mistaken moralists, but, as we learn from the poem entitled *Wages*, needs

> "The glory of going on, and still to be."

But let me quote Lord Tennyson's own words :—

> "The wages of sin is death : if the wages of virtue be dust,
> Would she have heart to endure for the life of the worm or the fly?"

One would have thought that even under these depressing circumstances a really religious and virtuous man would find much work to do in the world, and many a duty to perform ; but virtue, in the gospel according to Lord Tennyson, thinks otherwise. Take away the eternity on which she has set her heart, and—"She will not stay."

But if there is some faulty teaching in *Wages* and *In Memoriam*, what shall we say when we come to *Despair* and *The Promise of May?* In the former of these we have a terrible picture of a hopeless life and attempted suicide ; in the latter of a life spent in deliberate vice and heartless libertinism ; in both we are given to understand that the evil is the direct consequence of scepticism and unbelief. Can anything be more grossly unfair and misleading

than this? No doubt cases may occur where, in a peculiar class of character, loss of belief leads to unhappiness and even ruin; but that can hardly be held to justify a poet or dramatist in taking such individual cases and representing them as a general law. It would be at least equally easy to produce instances where exactly the contrary has occurred, where disbelief in the supernatural has led to a surer morality, a sounder judgment, and an altogether happier estimate of life. But, we know, any stick is good enough to beat a dog with; and, in his crusade against dogs of unbelievers, Lord Tennyson has no scruples as regards his choice of weapons.

Since morality, according to the Poet Laureate's teaching, is thus dependent on the holding of certain religious beliefs, we shall not be surprised if we find it taking strange forms in some of the characters which he has delineated in his poems. His treatment of the chief characters in the *Idylls of the King*, especially at the close of the story, will furnish a remarkable instance of his *modus operandi*. Anyone who has read Sir Thomas Malory's *History of King Arthur*, compiled about the year 1470 from still earlier romances, must have noticed how greatly Lord Tennyson is throughout indebted to the old historian for the subject-matter and even the words of his Epic. But there is one

important difference in his version of the Arthurian legend, and that too in the most vital and interesting part—the love of Lancelot and Guinevere. In the old story, though the fatal results of this guilty love are narrated sternly and unsparingly, the fact is never lost sight of that the lovers are true to each other to the bitter end; it is Lancelot and not the King who visits Guinevere in the sanctuary; it is Lancelot who, after the Queen's death, bears her body from Almesbury to its resting-place at Glastonbury; it is Lancelot who lingers and agonizes over her tomb, until death relieves him from his sorrow, and "the angels heave up Sir Lancelot towards heaven, and the gates of heaven open against him." Nothing can exceed the simple pathos and dignity of the story as thus told by the ancient historian, and those who know and love it cannot readily forgive Lord Tennyson for the alterations he has thought fit to introduce, however beautiful the language, in his Idyll *Guinevere.* The sudden repentance of the Queen; the discovery that Arthur, not Lancelot, is her own true lord; the one hope to be the mate of Arthur "hereafter in the heavens"—all this is very gratifying to the cheap and easy-going morality of the nineteenth century, but it is very untrue to nature, and very unlike the work of a great teacher.

When we come to consider the poems in which Lord Tennyson treats of social subjects we shall find that here, even less than in religious questions, is he entitled to the position of a leader of thought. Perhaps the theme which he has handled most powerfully is the iniquity of the loveless marriages of fashionable life, the "woman-markets of the west." In at least two poems this is the direct cause of the tragic ending, and in another and greater one it is closely connected with it. All readers must admire the noble scorn and indignation which are the keynote of *Aylmer's Field* and the earlier *Locksley Hall*, and in few other poems can one find such splendour of language and imagery. Yet the mingled weakness and violence of Leolin in *Aylmer's Field* disgust us almost as much as the amazing folly and selfishness of the hero of *Locksley Hall*, and in both poems the moral effect, which might otherwise have been very great, is ruined by the utterly foolish and immoral bearing of the most important character. It is very interesting to compare *Locksley Hall* with Mr. Browning's *The Worst of It* and Mr. Swinburne's *The Triumph of Time.* In all these poems we find the same subject—the character of a disappointed lover; but while Mr. Browning's and Mr. Swinburne's heroes bear their sorrows with noble and unselfish magnanimity, we find in Mr. Tennyson's hero such vulgar selfish-

ness and almost brutal violence as make the poem unspeakably inferior in dignity and moral effect.

The subject of *Maud* is, of course, a much wider and deeper one, but its defects are substantially the same. The surpassing charm of this poem ought not to blind our eyes to the strange moral blemishes which are the more monstrous and unnatural owing to the beauty of their surroundings. Maud herself is indeed eminently pure and faultless, but the character of her lover is so drawn as to make him almost contemptible in the eyes of the reader. No doubt his character was meant to be that of a selfish solitary, redeemed by love and sorrow to a sense of our common human fellowship; but, unfortunately for the moral of the poem, the hero's conduct is even more insane at the end than the beginning. The duel which brings about the final catastrophe could not have taken place but for his own wicked pride and childish folly; yet, amidst all his subsequent ravings, we never find a trace of true repentance or remorse. Then, again, the whole poem is saturated with "Jingoism" of the worst description, which reaches its culminating point when it is discovered that the one event which can comfort the bereaved lover, and restore him to a sphere of usefulness and activity, is—the Crimean war! What are we to think of the moral teaching of a writer who was so carried away by the bellicose

spirit of the time as to use all the resources of his art and poetical skill to vilify peace and glorify war?

I should like to remark, before leaving this part of our subject, that the characters drawn by Lord Tennyson are, with few exceptions, conspicuous for some grave defect, some moral flaw, which is the more fatal because it is unintentional on the part of the author. For of all faults to which a teacher of morality is liable, the worst is obviously that of not knowing whether he is describing what is moral or the contrary. If we study the Tennysonian characters, whether it be the hero of *Maud*, rushing off to the wars to kill other people because he has been unfortunate in his domestic career; or the hero of *Locksley Hall*, departing "seaward," and invoking a thunderbolt on his Amy's residence; or Leolin, in *Aylmer's Field*, committing suicide on the news of Edith's death; or the nurse in *The Children's Hospital* passionately asserting that she could not serve in the wards unless Christianity were true; we shall recognise in all of them the same moral defect, the same lack of any solid faith and well-founded enthusiasm, such as alone can enable a man to fight the battle of life for the sake of virtue itself and without reference to any selfish ulterior consideration. They all mean well; but they are all subject to the same unfortunate weakness before alluded

to, that, under the stress of trial or disappointment, they *cannot stay.*

On the other hand, there is another class of characters, of a less violent and unreasonable type (and these are distinctly held up for our admiration), in which we shall find defects which, if not so glaring, are at least as inveterate and dangerous. How is it that in the Arthurian Idylls the sympathy of the reader is rather with the erring Lancelot then the blameless King? Surely because in the character of Arthur there is a deep blot of selfishness and unctuous self-approval. That long sermon which he pronounces over the prostrate Guinevere could hardly have been uttered by a man of deep and tender feeling; a true-hearted husband could hardly sum up his wife's offences with the *sang froid* of a judge. The purity of Arthur is what Carlyle calls "the purity of dead dry sand;" and after reading his story one feels more strongly than ever that "best men are often moulded out of faults," and that the blameless Arthur is not one of these.

In *Enoch Arden*, we have, perhaps, the most truly heroic of all Mr. Tennyson's heroes, though I cannot agree with the critics who would regard him as a similar conception to the Prometheus of Æschylus or Shelley.* Yet the plot of the

* Cf. *Three Great Teachers of our Age.* "*Enoch Arden* is, in fact, the Promethean poem of the day."

story, though the intent is pure, is strangely unfortunate in its conclusion. The noble endurance and self-sacrifice of Enoch is, as far as Annie's peace of mind is concerned, spoiled and stultified by the result. The object of communicating the news of Enoch's death is to relieve Annie's mind of the fear that he may still be living; yet what would be the state of mind of a wife who learned, not that her former husband had long been dead, as she had hoped and been assured, but that his funeral was even now to take place; that he had been dwelling for a year in the same village as herself, and haunting her window like a ghost? It seems to be overlooked that there could be nothing but torture in such news as this, and that there is an unpardonable artistic blemish in leaving the story in such a helplessly morbid position.

If we turn to the political teaching of Lord Tennyson, we shall find in it little more than a mild optimism, and an attempt to strike the golden mean by avoiding "the falsehood of extremes."

> "Ah yet, tho' all the world forsake,
> Tho' fortune clip my wings,
> I will not cramp my heart, nor take
> Half views of men and things,
> Let Whig and Tory stir their blood;
> There must be stormy weather;
> But for some true result of good
> All parties work together."

The wisdom of such a doctrine is apparent rather than real; for history surely teaches us that truth does not always, or of necessity, lie between two extremes; there have been great questions as of Peace or War, Liberty or Slavery, where one party has been wholly and entirely in the right, and the other party wholly and entirely in the wrong. There are some great principles, even in politics, which one must accept and believe altogether, or not at all, and which one cannot afford to calculate or compromise. To be for ever straining to strike the balance between rival parties, and to assume a position of philosophic impartiality, is the characteristic of one who follows and does not lead the age, the mark of political scepticism rather than political wisdom.

In short, the whole philosophy of Lord Tennyson's writings is that of a "representative" and not an original poet. One may find in his works the current theories and speculations of the age, stated with marvellous force and unexampled felicity of expression, but the man who, amid the din of conflicting creeds, seeks for moral or religious guidance and support, such as thousands have sought and found in the teaching of Carlyle and Browning and Ruskin, will look in vain for such assistance in the writings of the Poet Laureate.

"The man of science himself is fonder of glory and vain;
An eye well practised in nature, a spirit bounded and poor;
The passionate heart of the poet is whirl'd into folly and vice.
I would not marvel at either, *but keep a temperate brain.*"

Such seems to be the leading and ever-present idea of the Tennysonian philosophy. But in this endeavour it may be that something more is lost than is gained, for it is sometimes forgotten that the passionate hearts of poets are whirled into other things besides folly and vice, such things as noble enthusiasm, unshaken faith in mankind, and uncompromising love of the good. However temperate the brain may be, no system of mild optimism, expressed in however magnificent language, can be weighed in the balance against the wiser and truer, though more passionate, utterances of those poets who are the real teachers of mankind.

After what we have seen of the Poet Laureate's opinions, religious, social, and political, I do not think we can justly be surprised at his having become a member of the House of Lords. He was always a half-hearted Liberal in his youth; and in his old age he has become more and more illiberal and dogmatic. He cannot correctly be called a "Lost Leader," for he never was a leader of thought, certainly not of advanced thought; yet, in one sense, he has done battle for the party of progress, for all true poets, apart

from their teaching, must in some degree aid the great cause. And, whatever we may think of Lord Tennyson's philosophical teaching, we must all alike admire and revere his grand poetical gifts; indeed it is just because we do so revere them, because we have known his poems from childhood, and have conned them over and over till they have become almost a part of our being, it is precisely for this reason that we deplore the intolerant tone of his later writings and the final hallucination which has made him deem it expedient to prefix to the name of Alfred Tennyson an empty and inglorious title.

Yet it should be remembered that this last act, which excited such widespread surprise among almost all classes of Englishmen, was nothing more than the culminating point of a process which had long been going on. It cannot be denied that during the last ten years the whole weight of the Poet Laureate's influence has been thrown more and more in favour of the aristocratic and reactionary party; while professing to stand aloof from the troubled element of politics, he has, for all practical purposes, done all that he could to arrest the march of free thought, and to hinder the awakening of the people. The bigoted and intolerant tone of many of his late poems, especially the sequel to *Locksley Hall*, has caused sorrow and disappointment to all true-hearted reformers, and

is the more deplorable and inconsistent since it comes from one who formerly posed as himself a champion of independent thought and a lover of liberty. But, after all, it is perhaps better that reformers should now have in Lord Tennyson a professed opponent rather than a lukewarm friend; and, in spite of his great and deserved reputation as a poet, his loss to the cause of liberty will be found to be less serious than might at first sight be imagined. For, while we fully admit the greatness of his purely poetical powers, we have no hesitation in asserting that the *thought* which runs through his writings is as feeble as the *expression* is beautiful. His philosophy, if such it can be called, was false and hollow from the beginning, and has become more and more unscientific with increasing age and intolerance.

The Works of James Thomson. (*"B. V."*) *

THE conditions which underlie the appearance of poetic genius are proverbially mysterious and inscrutable. Seldom, however, has Fate indulged in a stranger and more whimsical freak than in assigning one and the same name to two writers of such widely diverse temperaments as the placid, contented, and mildly optimistic poet whose *Castle of Indolence* still remains the most perfect expression of a life of leisured quietude, and the unhappy pessimist who could write *Mater Tenebrarum* and the *City of Dreadful Night.* One cannot but fear that this incongruous identity of name may in future years be a cause of trouble and confusion to a bewildered posterity. It certainly seems a trifle

* *The City of Dreadful Night*, and other poems, 1880. *Vane's Story*, and other poems, 1881. *Essays and Phantasies*, 1881. *A Voice from the Nile*, and other poems. With a memoir, by Bertram Dobell, 1884. (Messrs. Reeves & Turner.) *Satires and Profanities*, 1884. (Progressive Publishing Company.) *Shelley*, a poem, with other writings relating to Shelley. (Printed for private circulation, 1884.)

hard on the elder poet, the respectability of whose name has hitherto been beyond question in the most orthodox quarters, that his reputation should now be compromised, if not eclipsed, by the brilliant but erratic genius of his namesake, the youngest member of the poetic brotherhood. Comparisons are odious, but sometimes unavoidable. The *Castle of Indolence* is indeed a splendid structure, which none but a master-hand could have reared; but hereafter there may tower beside it—for are not the names of the two architects identical?—a *City* of still more colossal and majestic proportions.

At present, however, there is little danger of any such untoward confusion or comparison, for the simple reason that the genius of the younger James Thomson is still almost unknown to the mass of English readers. It is true that some first-rate critics have expressed strong interest and admiration for "B.V.'s" * poems; George Eliot, W. M. Rossetti, George Meredith, and George Saintsbury being among the earliest to recognise the remarkable merits of the *City of Dreadful Night*; yet, in spite of many favourable notices from competent judges, there has never been any general appreciation of Thomson's works. That he could ever become a

* *Bysshe Vanolis, a nom de plume,* said to have been adopted in memory of Shelley and Novalis.

popular poet was of course rendered impossible by the nature of his writings; but it is strange nevertheless that in this, the fourth year since his death, he should still be ignored or underrated in many literary circles where homage is often paid to men of far less distinguished genius.

James Thomson was pre-eminently a subjective poet; his life is the key to a proper understanding of his writings; and those who read between the lines of his poems and essays will not fail to discover that most of them are more or less autobiographical. An interesting account of Thomson's life may be found in Mr. Dobell's Memoir, prefixed to *A Voice from the Nile.* It is a sad record of a talented and chivalrous spirit struggling in vain against overwhelming misfortunes and afflictions, which were aggravated partly by a constitutional melancholia, probably inherited from his father; partly by the life-sorrow that dated from the sudden death of a beautiful girl to whom he was betrothed; and partly, it must be admitted, by the deplorable intemperance that darkened his later years. There is a striking similarity in the profound sadness of Thomson's career to some of the incidents in the life of Edgar Poë: the orphaned childhood; the drudgery of an uncongenial profession; the untimely death of one whose image thenceforth could never be

banished from the mind or the writings; the poverty and privations of an unsuccessful literary life; the use of stimulants as a desperate escape from the tortures of memory; and, lastly, the sudden death, apart from all friends, in a strange hospital—all this is common to the story of both poets. But Thomson's melancholy was deeper and more real than that of Poë: in lines such as the following, wherein he sums up the story of his life, there can be no suspicion of any poetic exaggeration for artistic purposes:—

> "For there my own good angel took my hand,
> And filled my soul with glory of her eyes,
> And led me through the love-lit Faërie Land
> Which joins our common world to Paradise.
> How soon, how soon, God called her from my side,
> Back to her own celestial sphere of day!
> And ever since she ceased to be my guide,
> I reel and stumble on life's solemn way.
> Ah, ever since her eyes withdrew their light,
> I wander lost in blackest stormy night."

Every reader of Thomson's poems must have noticed and wondered at the two different tones that are heard there; it seems almost incredible that the glad and exultant strains of *A Happy Poet* and *Sunday up the River* can have been written by the author of the *City of Dreadful Night*. Yet the discrepancy is perhaps more apparent than real; for the fact that Thomson was endowed with keen powers of enjoyment,

and had tasted at times some of the sweets of life, only serves to enhance the central and final gloom. It may be said of him, as of Schopenhauer, that "to be on the whole a believer in the misery of life, and yet to be occasionally visited by a vivid sense of its gleaming gladness, is surely the worst of conceivable positions." * This was precisely the position in which Thomson's lot was cast; and there can be no doubt that the general tenor of his writings is strongly and distinctly pessimistic, in spite of occasional intervals of hopefulness or enjoyment.

It is not, however, as a pessimist, but as a poet that Thomson is destined to be known. I will, therefore, begin by noticing his chief poetical characteristics. Of the three volumes of poetry now before the public, two were published during Thomson's lifetime, and the third in 1884, two years after his death. But many of the poems had appeared at earlier periods in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, the *National Reformer*, and other papers, while the author's habit of prefixing to each poem the date at which it was composed shows us that some of his writings were kept in hand many years before being published at all; indeed, there was one period of nearly seven years (1875-1881) during which, in despair of obtain-

* Sully's *Pessimism*, p. 81.

ing any recognition of his work, he altogether ceased to write poetry. This fulness of deliberation and maturity of workmanship form one of the most salient features in Thomson's style. He seldom indulges in unpremeditated lyric flights or irregularities of metre, and does not possess that supreme imaginative faculty which can create such poems as the odes of Coleridge or Shelley. His peculiarity consists in the rare combination of an exquisite harmony of tone, and an almost perfect sense of rhythmic melody, with a keen, strong, logical cast of mind. Contradictory as it may seem, his genius was at one and the same time both poetical and mathematical; he is the connecting link between Shelley on the one hand and Browning on the other; and it is curious to observe that certain of his poems—*Vane's Story*, for example—have been described by some critics as an echo of Shelley, by others as an echo of Browning. In this respect his position is unique; he successfully combines two mental qualities which are usually found to be antagonistic. I do not know of any other English poet who has been able to express such stern logic of realistic thought in such wonderfully subtle melody of language.

That Thomson's poetry has also certain unfortunate mannerisms and blemishes of style will not be denied by his warmest admirers.

Of the morbid tone that pervades most of his chief poems I shall have occasion to speak later on: his most conspicuous artistic faults are an excessive proneness to allegorical description, which sometimes involves the meaning in considerable obscurity; and a great inequality in the standard of his writing, which occasionally lapses into mediocrity and commonplace. In some of his poems his habit of coining double words is indulged almost to affectation; thus, in the first few stanzas of *Bertram to the Lady Geraldine*, we meet with the following: "vision-strange," "full-credentialled," "world-filled," "dove-quick," "calm-robed," "dance-ready," "ethereal-lightly," "whirl-wanton," "lightest-tender," "dim-steadfast," "drear-barren;" and many other equally strange combinations might be readily added to the list. The complaint made by some critics that Thomson's muse is addicted to faulty rhymes seems hardly justifiable; at any rate, if he sins in treating *column* and *solemn* as rhymes, and in other similar instances, it may be pleaded that he sins in excellent company; though we could wish perhaps that he had not extended the same licence to *war* and *more*. It may be here remarked that Thomson's mind seems to have been impressionable and receptive almost to a fault, for in reading his works we are constantly arrested by a reminiscence of Shelley, or the

Brownings, or Blake, or De Quincey, or some other favourite author, though there is certainly no trace of anything like deliberate imitation.

Thomson's purely poetic powers, apart from his pessimistic teaching, may be studied in his lyric pieces and translations from Heine, or such narrative and artistic poems as *Weddah and Om-El Bonain* and *The Naked Goddess.* The former of these is a tragic story of Oriental love, told in eight-lined stanzas of wonderful beauty and vigour. Some of the more pathetic passages in this poem recall Keats's *Isabella*; but the movement, as a rule, is more rapid; the end is kept steadily in view throughout, and there is little ornament or digression. It would be impossible to do justice to *Weddah and Om-El Bonain* by the quotation of any special stanzas; for its great merit consists in the consummate skill with which the different parts are welded together and the thread of the story preserved. It is a remarkable poem, and sufficient in itself to win a lasting reputation for its author: some readers will perhaps like it all the better because it is free from all elements of a personal and subjective nature. Shorter, and less ambitious in its scope, yet scarcely less delightful, is *The Naked Goddess,* a splendid allegory descriptive of the untameable wildness of the Goddess of Nature, whom the votaries of modern civilisation foolishly attempt to clothe.

Vainly do the high-priest and the arch-sage, as the spokesmen of the assembled citizens, who have flocked out in crowds at the news of the shining apparition, urge upon the haughty goddess the desirability of conforming to the laws of society and assuming the religious or philosophic gown. She dismisses them with contempt, and asks that some child may be sent to her. Then follows a passage very suggestive of Blake's style :—

> "So two little children went,
> Lingering up the green ascent,
> Hand in hand, but grew the while
> Bolder in her gentle smile.
> 'Tell me, darlings, now,' said she,
> 'What they want to say to me.'
> Boy and girl then, nothing loth,
> Sometimes one and sometimes both,
> Prattled to her sitting there
> Fondling with their soft young hair.
> 'Dear kind lady, do you stay
> Here with always holiday?
> Do you sleep among the trees?
> People want you, if you please,
> To put on your dress and come
> With us to the City home.'"

The Naked Goddess is the best of Thomson's artistic poems ; but there are several others on general subjects which deserve high praise, especially *In the Room*, a dramatic study full of weird tragic force, and *A Voice from the*

Nile, one of the few specimens of Thomson's blank verse. The quiet dignity and latent strength of the latter poem are well suited to the subject; in reading these slow and stately lines we seem to breathe the same calm air as in Landor's *Gebir*, and to hear the majestic river "lapsing along," as in Leigh Hunt's famous sonnet. Unmistakable evidences of true poetic genius may also be found in many of Thomson's songs and short poems, among which I would particularly mention the lines on *William Blake*, *A Requiem*, *E. B. B.*—memorial verses on the death of Mrs. Browning, and the two songs commencing *The fire that filled my heart of old* and *The nightingale was not yet heard.* In writing of Mrs. Browning, Thomson seems to have unconsciously caught an inspiration from the peculiar style of the poetess, as in the lines:—

> "Italy, you hold in trust
> Very sacred English dust."

and the same extraordinary similarity of tone may be observed in the verses on Blake, which are apparently conceived in the very spirit of Blake himself. The translations from Heine, who, next to Shelley, was Thomson's favourite author, have been approved by the best critics as admirable attempts in a kind of writing where

complete success can scarcely be regarded as possible,

But it is now time to turn to those more characteristic poems in which Thomson gives free play not only to his poetic genius but to his own feelings and emotions. It may be convenient to consider these under two heads: first, those which breathe a tone of hopefulness, or at any rate of pensive resignation; and, secondly, those of a decidedly gloomy and pessimistic cast. It will be found by those readers who care to examine the dates of the poems that the former belong mainly, though not exclusively, to the earlier portion of his life, and the latter rather to the dreary period of his London career.

The two *Idylls of Cockaigne*, *Sunday at Hampstead*, and *Sunday up the River*, are perhaps the best known of Thomson's writings next to the *City of Dreadful Night*. There is a rare charm in the complete *abandon* of these poems and their entire disregard of the social bugbear of respectability. They are conceived in a spirit of boisterous and irrepressible merriment, yet there is throughout an undertone of very true and deep feeling which redeems them from any taint of coarseness or vulgarity. *Sunday up the River* is decidedly the finer of the two, being, indeed, a rich mine of lyric poetry of a very high order, and the best con-

tribution made for a very long time to the literature of the Thames. Less exuberant in tone than these two idylls, but nevertheless contrasting strangely with the usual despondency of Thomson's writings, are *A Happy Poet* and *The Lord of the Castle of Indolence*, written in 1859. The former describes in lines of singular beauty the duties and functions of the ideal poet, while the latter depicts the character of one of those true-born monarchs, those "right royal kings,"

"Whom all the laws of Life conspire to love and bless."

In reading *The Lord of the Castle of Indolence* it is difficult to feel sure whether the writer is studying a purely ideal character, or glancing at the capabilities of his own youth, or, as the title of the poem seems to indicate, referring to his own namesake and predecessor in the poetic art "Jamie Thomson, of most peaceful and blessed memory," as he calls him elsewhere. But however this may be, these two poems are certainly remarkable as coming from the pen of a confirmed pessimist. What could be more optimistic than the following stanzas from *The Lord of the Castle of Indolence*?—

"While others fumed and schemed and toiled in vain
To mould the world according to their mood,
He did by might of perfect faith refrain
From any part in such disturbance rude.

The world, he said, indeed is very good,
  Its Maker surely wiser far than we;
Feed soul and flesh upon its bounteous food,
  Nor fret because of ill; All-good is He,
And worketh not in years but in eternity."

In the same catholic spirit he writes of the duties of *A Happy Poet* :—

"For I must sing: of mountains, deserts, seas,
  Of rivers ever flowing, ever flowing;
Of beasts and birds, of grass and flowers and trees
  For ever fading and for ever growing;
Of calm and storm, of night and eve and noon,
Of boundless space, and sun and stars and moon.

And most supremely of my human kin;
  Their thoughts and deeds, their valours and their fears,
Their griefs and joys, their virtue and their sin,
  Their feasts and wars, their cradles and their biers,
Their temples, prisons, homes, and ships and marts,
The subtlest windings of their brains and hearts."

But, alas! all poets are not happy poets; and as the years roll on and the troubles of life increase, the subjects of song are apt to become limited, as in James Thomson's case, to the darker study of *self*. There is a noticeable stanza elsewhere in *A Happy Poet*, in which this seems to be foreseen :—

"Is it not strange? I could more amply tell
  Such woes of men as I discern or dream,
Than this great happiness I know so well,
  Which is in truth profounder than they seem;
And which abides for ever pure and deep,
Beneath all dreams of wakefulness and sleep."

We next come to a group of poems which are all inspired to some extent by the same idea —a soft and hallowed reminiscence of the lost love who was ever present to Thomson's mind. *Bertram to the Lady Geraldine* is a poetic rhapsody, passionately conceived, and passionately executed, and worthy to be placed beside Mrs. Browning's wonderful poem, to which it is akin in something more than name. *The Fadeless Bower*, on the other hand, is more distinctly narrative and autobiographical, perhaps the tenderest and most pathetic of all Thomson's writings. Very simple yet very beautiful are the words in which he recalls that "vision of the Long ago," "the dear old bower," where he reached the crowning point of his life.

> "I have this moment told my love;
> Kneeling, I clasp her hands in mine:
> She does not speak, she does not move;
> The silent answer is divine.
> The flood of rapture swells till breath
> Is almost tranced in deathless death.
>
> The simple folds of white invest
> Her noble form, as purest snow
> Some far and lovely mountain-crest,
> Faint-flushed with all the dawn's first glow;
> Alone, resplendent, lifted high
> Into the clear vast breathless sky."

Vane's Story, which gives its name to the second volume of poems, is also a record of a

vision of the same lost love, but told in a more fantastic and imaginative style. It does not seem to have left a very favourable impression on the mind of most of its critics, some of whom have not unnaturally taken offence at the religious speculations which have rather unnecessarily been imported into the poem, while others have been puzzled by the odd mixture of the supernatural and commonplace, which often remind the reader of Mr. Browning's *Christmas Eve and Easter Day.* Yet *Vane's Story* contains passages of extraordinary beauty; where, for instance, since the days of Shelley, could we discern anything more perfectly melodious than this?—

> "And thou shalt kneel and make thy prayer,
> A childish prayer for simple boon;
> That soon and soon and very soon
> Our lady of Oblivious Death
> May come and hush my painful breath
> And bear me thorough Lethe-stream,
> Sleeping sweet sleep without a dream;
> And bring you also from that sphere
> Where you grow sad without me, Dear;
> And bear us to her deepest cave
> Under the Sea without a wave,
> Where the eternal shadows brood
> In the Eternal Solitude.
> Stirring never, breathing never,
> Silent for ever and for ever;
> And side by side, and face to face,
> And linked as in a death-embrace,
> Leave us absorbing thus the balm
> Of most divinely perfect calm."

Equally beautiful is the allegory of the fountain, apparently typical of Thomson's own life, and comparable in many ways with Shelley's *Sensitive Plant*, by which it seems to have been suggested. *Vane's Story* is especially interesting as throwing much light on the peculiar feelings and idiosyncrasies of its author; it is, as Mr. Dobell remarks, "when rightly read, as candid and complete an autobiography as was ever written," for it shows Thomson in the familiar mood in which he was known to his friends. But it does not carry us into that last and saddest period of his life, when he seems to have lost even those glimpses of consolatory hope, shadowy and uncertain from the first, of meeting his betrothed in some future existence. The transition to this final phase of thought and feeling may be best understood by reference to his essay, entitled *A Lady of Sorrow*, which is, in fact, the prose counterpart of *The City of Dreadful Night*. We find there a description of three successive stages of grief, which we cannot doubt to be in some measure a record of Thomson's own experiences. First comes the "Lady of Sorrow," typical of a pure and hallowed grief, "the image in beatitude of her who died so young;" secondly, "the Siren," the period of less blameless sorrow, when the "ignoble heart found ignobler companionship," being no longer worthy "to be comforted with

angelic communion;" and last, "the Shadow," the spirit of total gloom; "never more an Angel, seldom more a Siren, but now a formless Shadow, pervading my soul as the darkness of night pervades the air." In this dreary region of desolation and despair the poet can find only one consolatory thought, and that is the prospect of death, that "Lady of Oblivion" whom he invokes with such solemnity and earnestness in his singularly beautiful poem *To our Ladies of Death.*

"O sweetest Sister, and sole Patron Saint
  Of all the humble eremites who flee
From out life's crowded tumult, stunned and faint,
  To seek a stern and lone tranquillity
In Libyan wastes of time: my hopeless life
With famished yearning craveth rest from strife;
  Therefore, thou Restful One, I call on Thee!

Take me and lull me into perfect sleep;
  Down, down, far-hidden in thy duskiest cave;
While all the clamorous years above me sweep
  Unheard, or like the voice of seas that rave
On far-off coasts, but murmuring o'er my trance
A dim vast monotone, that shall enhance
  The restful rapture of the inviolate grave."

There are several minor poems that prefigure the advent of *The City of Dreadful Night.* Of these, the earliest is *The Doom of a City*, written in 1857, which contains several fine passages, but fails somewhat in its general

effect, through being too discursive and allegorical. *Mater Tenebrarum* (1859) is one of the saddest and bitterest of all Thomson's outbusts of grief, a cry of anguish from a soul torn asunder between hope and despair, at one moment almost venturing to believe in its own immortality, and then again relapsing to the creed of "a blind and stony doom." It is almost a relief to turn from this poem to *The City of Dreadful Night*, in which we feel at once that we have reached Thomson's masterpiece, the work by which, more than any other, he will be judged by posterity. We here see the poetry of pessimism in its most attractive garb; for the reasoning which inspires the poem, sad though it be, is calm and consistent throughout, and is expressed in language of consummate grace and tenderness. *The City of Dreadful Night* is an allegorical description of the dark side of human life, the "sad fraternity" who inhabit the city being those whose hope and faith is dead, since they have ventured to stand face to face with the stern facts of existence. How they have arrived there they cannot themselves determine, but, once being citizens, they must "dree their weird" to the bitter end; for their case is more desperate than that of Bunyan's pilgrims who were taken captives by Giant Despair, there being no "Key of Promise" which can open

the gates of this "dolent city." The imagery under which the city is depicted was obviously suggested by the poet's reminiscences of his own London life, and the best clue to a right understanding of the whole poem will be found in the third part of *A Lady of Sorrow*, the prose essay already mentioned. "And I wandered about the city," he there writes, "the vast Metropolis which was become as a vast Necropolis. Desolate indeed I was, although ever and anon, here and there, in wan haggard faces, in wrinkled brows, in thin compressed lips, in drooping frames, in tremulous gestures, in glassy hopeless eyes, I detected the tokens of brotherhood, I recognised my brethren, in the great Freemasonry of Sorrow." It is to these brethren, as he tells us in the Proem, that the writer appeals.

"Yes, here and there some weary wanderer
  In that same city of tremendous night
Will understand the speech, and feel a stir
  Of fellowship in all-disastrous fight;
I suffer mute and lonely, yet another
Uplifts his voice to let me know a brother
  Travels the same wild paths though out of sight."

The City of Dreadful Night is arranged in a series of short cantos where two metres are used alternately, the first consisting of seven-lined stanzas, of which the fifth and sixth lines

always end in a dissyllable, as in the example just quoted; the second consisting of stanzas of six lines, broken from time to time by the interposition, for dramatic purposes, of other metres. The seven-lined stanzas, into which no variation is introduced, are devoted to describing the appearance of the city and moralising on the darker mysteries of its life. The dense atmosphere, the baleful glooms dimly lit by the struggling lamps, the sombre mansions looming through the murky air, the dreary streets where the inhabitants wander like ghosts; where the eye learns a new power of vision, and the accustomed ear catches muffled throbs of suffering, or the jar of phantom wheels—all this is described with reality of lurid word-painting, unequalled since the time of Coleridge and De Quincey. The "English opium-eater" has himself recorded that the chief "virtue" of opium lies in "the faculty of mental vision, the increased power of dealing with the shadowy and the dark." This power was undoubtedly possessed in an eminent degree by the author of *The City of Dreadful Night*, though it may be that it was acquired by the use of some less romantic but not less potent drug than that which De Quincey has immortalised. There is a dreadful and vivid reality about Thomson's dream-pictures, which makes it difficult to suspect him for a moment

of cultivating a taste for this "night-side of human nature" by a voluptuous indulgence in stimulants; a charge which Coleridge advanced against De Quincey, and which De Quincey angrily retorts.* However that may be, there can be no question about the poetic excellence of Thomson's work. Here is an instance of a short canto full of weird imagery which suggests still more than it describes:—

"It is full strange to him who hears and feels,
  When wandering there in some deserted street,
The booming and the jar of ponderous wheels,
  The trampling clash of heavy ironshod feet:
Who in this Venice of the Black Sea rideth?
Who in this city of the stars abideth
  To buy or sell as those in daylight sweet?

The rolling thunder seems to fill the sky
  As it comes on; the horses snort and strain,
The harness jingles, as it passes by;
  The hugeness of an overburthened wain:
A man sits nodding on the shaft or trudges
Three-parts asleep beside his fellow-drudges;
  And so it rolls into the night again.

What merchandise? Whence, whither, and for whom?
  Perchance it is a Fate-appointed hearse,
Bearing away to some mysterious tomb
  Or Limbo of the scornful universe

* "Ay, indeed! Where did he learn *that?* . . . Coleridge began in rheumatic pains. What then? This is no proof that he did not end in voluptuousness."—*De Quincey*, xi. 109.

The joy, the peace, the life-hope, the abortions
Of all things good which should have been our portions
But have been strangled by that City's curse."

The alternate cantos of six-lined stanzas are employed for the dramatic introduction of certain scenes and characters, which serve to illustrate and enforce the hopeless condition of the wanderers in the city. One citizen, "shadow-like and frail," is described as perpetually revisiting the spots which had witnessed successively the death of Faith, of Love, of Hope. Another narrates how he "strode on austere" through a desert filled with phantom shapes and unimaginable horrors. A third has reached the welcome portal of death, where those who enter must leave all hope behind, but, alas! having no hope to leave, he is rejected until he can pay the fated toll. In another scene a bereaved lover kneels beside the body of his mistress, which lies in state in a gloomy mausoleum. Elsewhere, in a mighty cathedral, a preacher, with "voice of solemn stress," urges on his hearers the lesson that "the grave's most holy peace" is the sure consolation for the ills of existence; but even this comfort is rejected as a mockery by "a vehement voice" which rises from the northern aisle and narrates the brief story of a blank and inconsolable life. In these and other similar

scenes the same moral, though viewed from different standpoints, is again and again stated and reiterated: life is a cheat and delusion, and the only comfort—if comfort it be—is the certainty of death. Not even Keats could have described the blissfulness of "easeful death" with more softness of rhyme and unfeigned yearning of heart than Thomson has done in passage after passage of *The City of Dreadful Night.* Even suicide is several times referred to as a justifiable and praiseworthy escape from intolerable misery; one of the most splendid cantos in the poem being that which describes the "River of the Suicides," where night by night some wanderer finds relief:—

> They perish from their suffering surely thus,
> For none beholding them attempts to save,
> The while each thinks how soon, solicitous,
> He may seek refuge in the self-same wave;
> Some hour when tired of ever-vain endurance
> Impatience will forerun the sweet assurance
> Of perfect peace eventual in the grave.

The closing canto is devoted to a wonderfully vivid description of Albert Durer's "Melencolia," here identified with the goddess whose bronze image presides over the city.

The most noticeable of Thomson's latest poems are placed together at the beginning of the volume entitled *A Voice from the Nile.*

Several of these are very good, especially *Richard Forest's Midsummer Night*, *He heard her Sing*, and *Insomnia*. The last-mentioned is in many ways akin to, *The City of Dreadful Night*, but, if possible, is still more painful and harrowing. It narrates, with terrible vividness and all that sombre imagery of which Thomson was so great a master, the horrors of the sleepless night, every hour of which is as a deep ravine which must be crossed from ridge to ridge by the staggering, stumbling, foot-sore sufferer. This poem was written in March 1882. Three months afterwards the poet died.

To attempt to estimate Thomson's future place among English writers would be a hopeless and unprofitable task. That he was in the truest sense a great poet will not, I think, be denied by those who give his poems the attention they deserve, and who are not prejudiced against him at the outset, on account of his heterodox teaching and unpopular connections. Time is needed to remove these and similar obstacles, which at present bar the way to a right understanding and appreciation of his genius. The thanks of all those who have become acquainted with these wonderful poems are due to Thomson's friend and biographer, Mr. Dobell, by whose exertions the publication of the three volumes was fortunately secured,

and who will do yet another service to English literature if he can hereafter arrange for the production of a complete edition of Thomson's writings.

As a prose writer Thomson is at present almost unknown. Yet ample evidence of his power may be gathered from every page of the two volumes already published,[1] and it is understood that there are also many uncollected articles of great merit. His style is admirably clear and forcible, at times reminding one strongly of De Quincey, as when he gives free play to his imaginative powers in *A Lady of Sorrow*, of which I have already spoken, *The Fair of St. Sylvester*, *In our Forest of the Past*, and other essays. Perhaps the best of all his prose writings are the articles on *Open Secret Societies*, and *Indolence*, which, though inspired by sincere feeling and conviction, are pervaded by a subtle and lambent humour which lend them a peculiar charm. In satire also Thomson could wield a keen and trenchant pen, as may readily be seen by a study of his inimitable essay on *The Speedy Extinction of Evil and Misery*, a splendid piece of ironical writing, something in the style of Swift and of which even Swift himself might have been proud. In the collection of articles reprinted after Thomson's death by the Progressive Publishing Company, under the

Essays and Phantasies, 1881. *Satires and Profanities*, 1884.

title of *Satires and Profanities*, there are many other instances of rare satirical power; but the cause in which the satirist's genius was enlisted is not one which would commend itself to the majority of readers. Of Thomson's abilities as a literary critic we find several examples in *Essays and Phantasies*, especially his *Evening with Spenser* and *Note on Forster's Life of Swift*, in the latter of which he severely censures Lord Macaulay for his exaggerated and distorted portrait of the famous Dean. "This is really very fine," he exclaims, "in the way of the dreadful, my rhetorical lord: but if we could only have, to hang beside it, Swift's portrait of *you!*" Among contemporary prose writers Thomson had a profound admiration for Ruskin, George Eliot, and George Meredith; while he regarded Browning as the greatest of living English poets. He speaks in depreciating terms of the Poet Laureate's "hysterics and commonplace philosophy;" and words can hardly express his contempt for Longfellow, the demi-god of popular mediocrity. "The sublime *Excelsior!*" he says, "is very popular at present, but I doubt whether any man (soft curates, Sunday-school teachers, and tea-meeting muffs, who think beer and tobacco certain perdition, are of course not included) ever read the adventures of its lofty hero without ejaculating: *The ineffable ass! The in-*

fernal idiot! What possible good could he do himself, or anybody else, by planting that banner with the very strange device on the top of that mountain? Well, he perished, and I trust that the coroner's jury found a verdict of, Serve him right."

One cannot help being struck by the reflection that the recognition of Thomson's literary genius was absurdly inadequate (in the case of his prose, perhaps, even more than his poetry) to the actual merits of the writings. The legend of the god Apollo doing menial service for the mortal Admetus in this instance received a fresh and signal illustration. For many years he contributed almost exclusively to the *The National Reformer*, and when that engagement failed him the author of *The City of Dreadful Night* thankfully accepted the chance of transferring his services to *Cope's Tobacco Plant*, a periodical devoted to advertising the business of a well-known Liverpool firm. In some ways, however, this connection proved a very useful one to Thomson; for as he could not, or would not, write to order, he was glad of a medium through which he could publish his writings without restraint. This he found in *Cope's Tobacco Plant*, in which he accordingly published a number of reviews of new books, with essays on Rabelais, Ben Jonson, Walt Whitman, Baudelaire, Flaubert, and other authors.

When we come to sum up the leading points of Thomson's life and character, we are naturally met by the consideration how far his morbid despondency, which we call pessimism, was due to his misfortunes, and how far to physical causes. Coleridge, in his ode on *Dejection*, to which, by-the-bye, many of Thomson's poems bear a strong resemblance, gives it as his opinion that outward forms and circumstances can in no way affect "the passion and the life whose fountains are within." Sydney Smith, too, has somewhere remarked, in his inimitably matter-of-fact fashion, that morbid melancholy is usually the result of a bad digestion, and may be best cured by a suitable dose of medicine. The disease in Thomson's case hardly admitted of so expeditious a remedy. It is the opinion of one of his biographers that Thomson inherited a constitutional melancholia, and that his early bereavement was "not the *cause* of his life-long misery, but merely the peg on which he hung his raiment of sorrow."[1] Mr. Dobell, however, is inclined to believe that "no other affliction could have affected him as he was affected by this." One would probably be safe in concluding that the truth lies somewhere between these two theories, and that Thomson's pessimistic bent of mind was brought about partly by an

[1] *Vide* Mr. Foote's Preface to *Satires and Profanities.*

inherited disposition to melancholia, and partly by the crushing misfortune of his early life. It must not be supposed, however, that, pessimist as he was, he was accustomed to make a profession and parade of his sufferings: on the contrary, all accounts agree in representing him as a singularly cheerful companion, and one of the most brilliant of talkers. Neither did his pessimism take a cynical and misanthropic turn, as in the case of Schopenhauer, who regarded, or affected to regard, his fellow-creatures and fellow-sufferers (synonymous terms, as he thought) with aversion and dislike. Thomson's disposition, on the other hand, was always benevolent and kindly, in which respect he resembles Shelley, for whom he again and again expresses the warmest feelings of reverence and admiration,[1] and to whom, as "the poet of poets and purest of men," *Vane's Story*, with its accompanying poems, is dedicated. But, unfortunately, he could not share in the more hopeful side of Shelley's philosophy, his *Proposals for the Speedy Extinction of Evil and Misery* being a proof of his total lack of belief in the perfectibility of mankind and much else that Shelley held dear. The influence of Leopardi, to whom he appropriately dedicated

[1] *Vide* especially the splendid poem on *Shelley*, by far the noblest of the many tributes offered to Shelley's memory by later writers.

The City of Dreadful Night, was a strong counter-attraction in the direction of pessimism, from which nothing would have been more likely to rescue him than his love for Shelley, who, in spite of his "wail for the world's wrong," was anything rather than a pessimist. So while Shelley's philanthropy took the form of a life-protest against injustice and tyranny, Thomson's message of glad tidings to his fellow-sufferers is little more than a gospel of despair.

Yet, after all, Thomson was well aware that in thus laying stress on the gloomy aspects of existence he was stating less the absolute fact than his own opinion, a half-view true as far as it went, yet by no means the complete truth. In the introductory note to *A Lady of Sorrow* he speaks of himself under the title of "my friend Vane," and volunteers a criticism of his own pessimistic philosophy. "That this composition," he says, "is true in relation to the author that it is genuine, I have no doubt, for the poor fellow had large gifts for being unhappy. But is it true in relation to the world and general life? I think true, but not the whole truth. There is truth of winter and black night, there is truth of summer and dazzling noonday. On the one side of the great medal are stamped the glory and triumph of life, on the other side are stamped the glory and triumph of death; but which is the obverse and

which the reverse none of us surely knows." One could hardly desire a better piece of insight and self-criticism than this. We may well regret that Thomson's genius was not of wide enough scope to depict both aspects of life; but we cannot deny that he has painted "the glory and triumph of death" as it has seldom been painted before. There is a spirituality of tone pervading even his most desponding poems which at once lifts him from the class of ordinary materialists; while, side by side with the scathing satire which he launched at the orthodox theology, there are many indications in his writings of deep tenderness and sympathy with true religious feeling.[1]

Thomson was a firm democrat and revolutionist, as may be seen from such poems as *L'Ancien Régime*, *A Polish Insurgent*, *Garibaldi Revisiting England*, and *Despotism tempered by Dynamite*. His compassion for all victims of social injustice was also very keen, and finds expression in the verses on *Low Life*, and the essay entitled *In Our Forest of the Past*. He took a gloomy view, however, of most kinds of philanthropic enterprises and endeavours to redress the wrongs of society, being of opinion that "all proselytism is useless and absurd." He several times in-

[1] *Vide* the Sonnet on *A Recusant*, and *Open Secret Societies*, pp. 200-203.

veighs against the restlessness of the present age. "In our time and country we have a plague of busy-bodyism, certainly more annoying and perhaps more noxious than the plague of idleness. One comes across many earnest and energetic characters who are no longer men but simply machines for working out their 'missions.'"[1] How far this feeling of Thomson's was due to his pessimistic creed, which, like fatalism, must tend to some extent to paralyse action, we need not pause to inquire, but it should in justice be noted that the "indolence" of which he speaks with approbation in several of his essays is very far from meaning a culpable neglect of duty, but is simply an equivalent for that philosophic love of leisure the value of which is too apt to be forgotten in the excitement of a busy world.

What, then, will be the final impression left on our minds by the study of James Thomson's character and writings? That, I think, will depend mainly on the reader's individual bias of thought, and will vary accordingly. Some will see the cause of Thomson's errors and misery in his agnostic philosophy, which cut him off from the hopes and consolation of religious faith. Others will deplore the moral weakness which could allow a whole life to be

[1] *Indolence*—A Moral Essay, p. 160.

blighted on account of an early sorrow, and will point to cases where a similar affliction has not only been borne with resignation but has even stimulated heroic service in the cause of mankind. Such criticism is natural and inevitable, yet it can scarcely be accepted as satisfactory or conclusive, for a character such as Thomson's is too complex and many-sided to be thus summarily estimated. That he erred grievously in the excesses of his later years is unfortunately undeniable; yet it may be, that if we could realise the full history of his life, and the many difficulties under which he laboured, we should feel impelled to express pity rather than blame. For my part, I should find it impossible to regret that he followed to the last that line of thought which his own conscience told him was the true one, although it could not lead him to the hopes which his heart desired; or that he faithfully cherished the memory of his early love, even at the cost of a life-long unhappiness. There are plenty of men in the world who have philosophy enough to enable them to forget such bereavements; it is refreshing now and again to meet a man of a more passionate and constant temperament. Whatever his faults may have been, it seems that Thomson's character was one that endeared him to all his acquaintances; all alike bear testimony to the gentleness and chivalry of his nature, and to the

extraordinary charm of his manner and conversation. Very striking and very pathetic is the account of his personal appearance, as given by one who knew him.[1] "He looked like a veteran scarred in the fierce affrays of life's war, and worn by the strain of forced marches. . . . You could see the shadow that 'tremendous fate' had cast over that naturally buoyant nature. It had eaten great furrows into his broad brow, and cut tear-tracks downward, from his wistful eyes, so plaintive and brimful of unspeakable tenderness as they opened wide when in serious talk." Such was James Thomson, the author of *The City of Dreadful Night*, a poet who, in spite of his present obscurity, is perhaps destined some day to take a high place in English literature. He lies buried in a humble grave in Highgate Cemetery; and we may speak of him, in conclusion, in the words of his own *Requiem*:—

Thou hast lived in pain and woe,
  Thou hast lived in grief and fear;
Now thine heart can dread no blow,
  Now thine eye can shed no tear:
    Storms round us shall beat and rave;
    Thou art sheltered in the grave.

[1] Essay in *Secular Review*, by Mr. Flaws.

On Certain Lyric Poets, and their Critics.

THE poet and the critic have been at variance from time immemorial, yet I doubt if any modern poetical work has been subjected to so much mistaken criticism as the imaginative and impassioned style of poetry of which Shelley and Swinburne are perhaps the most notable representatives. It has at all times been a common complaint against such writers that they subordinate the true and natural to the unreal and mystical, and that their poetry is consequently of only secondary value. As a typical instance of this kind of criticism, I will quote the opinion of Sir Henry Taylor, as given in the Preface to *Philip Van Artevelde.*

Speaking of Shelley and his followers, whom he calls the "Phantastic school," he says:

"Much beauty, exceeding splendour of diction and imagery, cannot but be perceived in his poetry, as well as exquisite charms of versification; and a reader of an apprehensive fancy will doubtless be entranced while he reads; but when he shall have closed the volume, and considered within himself what it has added to his stock of permanent

impressions, of recurring thoughts, of pregnant recollections, he will probably find his stores in this kind no more enriched by having read Mr. Shelley's poems, than by having gazed on so many gorgeously-coloured clouds in an evening sky."

Again, in another passage, he finds fault with the "new poets," of whom Byron and Shelley were the chief, on the ground that they did not attempt to "thread the mazes of life in all its classes and under all its circumstances, common as well as romantic;" and he comes to the conclusion that such poetry, "though it may be excellent of its kind, will not long be reputed to be poetry of the highest order. It may move the feelings and charm the fancy, but failing to satisfy the understanding it will not take permanent possession of the strongholds of fame."

This criticism undoubtedly expresses the views of a large class of critics and readers. And in a certain limited sense it is an undisputed fact, that Shelley, like others of the "new poets," did not study life under all its circumstances, as Shakspere or Goethe studied it. But when Sir Henry Taylor, and those who think with him, proceed to assert that such poetry is therefore a failure, or at any rate worthy only of partial and limited approval, they are arriving at a most unjust and unwarrantable conclusion. For lyric poetry is valuable, not as a philosophic study of every phase and condition of life, but as an

expression of certain spiritual emotions which are none the less real because they are not universal. Poetry is a many-sided art; and it is absurd to lay down a strict rule, and define that as the only poetry, or as the only noble poetry, which takes a purely dispassionate and philosophical view of life. All this must ever be a matter of individual opinion; and therefore those who attempt to judge lyric poetry by the alien standard of practical utility or philosophic precision, must stand condemned of being naturally incapable of comprehending the very essence of the lyrical spirit. Their criticism may be perfectly true in its merely negative assertions, while all the time it entirely fails to understand the object and motive power of the poetry it assails, and furnishes us with another illustration of what Macaulay describes as "the irrational laws which bad critics have framed for the government of poets."

In short, there is a natural deficiency in the minds of some critics, however acute they may be in other respects. In applying the ordinary rules of literary criticism to the ethereal subtleties of lyric poetry, they are engaged in a hopeless task of beating the air. They grasp the impalpable, and complain that it is light and unsubstantial; they stare at the invisible, and pronounce it mystic and obscure; they listen diligently for the inaudible, and are mightily

offended because they hear nothing. They accordingly pronounce certain styles of poetry to be unreal, shallow, meaningless; and never for a moment suspect that they themselves are in fault, owing to their own inherent inability to appreciate certain delicate emotions. When a disciple of the common-sense school finds himself, as Sir Henry Taylor says, in no way enriched by reading Shelley's poems, we are inevitably reminded of Peter Bell and his very disparaging opinion as to the utility of wild-flowers:

> "A primrose by a river's brim
> A yellow primrose was to him,
> And it was nothing more."

But, before we go farther, it may be well here to inquire what is this hidden charm in the spirit of lyrical poetry, so vague and unreal to some, yet so true and ever-present to others. We can scarcely hope to define it successfully, for it is well-nigh indefinable: we can only appeal to the intuitive perception of those who have felt it, and who can bear witness what a reality it has been to them. It is the charm of expressing by language something far more than what is conveyed by the mere meaning or the mere sound; the power of evoking an echo from the spiritual world, such as music can often give us, or the clash of distant bells. It is the miracle o

kindling by words that divine sympathy with the inarticulate voice of the elements, which we feel in the presence of the wind, the sea, the mountains. It is that communion with the spirit of nature of which Shelley writes, as none other could have written:

> "Fair are others; none beholds thee;
> But thy voice sounds low and tender
> Like the fairest, for it folds thee
> From the sight, that liquid splendour;
> And all feel, yet see thee never,—
> As I feel now, lost for ever!"

Such sympathy is instinctive, heaven-sent, unattainable by human diligence or philosophic speculation; those who feel it not will for ever fail to comprehend it, and those who have once felt it will value it above all mortal possessions. It is of such as these that Swinburne speaks:

> "For these have the toil and the guerdon[1]
> That the wind has eternally; these
> Have part in the boon and the burden
> Of the sleepless unsatisfied breeze,
> That finds not, but seeking rejoices
> That possession can work him no wrong:
> And the voice at the heart of their voice is
> The sense of his song.
>
> For the wind's is their doom and their blessing
> To desire, and have always above
> A possession beyond their possessing,
> A love beyond reach of their love.

[1] *By the North Sea.*

Green earth has her sons and her daughters,
And these have their guerdons; but we
Are the wind's and the sun's and the water's,
Elect of the sea."

While speaking on this subject I could hardly have quoted from a more appropriate source than from the writings of the poet who, next to Shelley, has been endowed with the largest share of impassioned lyric inspiration; and who has certainly been not less misconstrued and misunderstood than was his great predecessor. Critics are never weary of harping on the so-called aberrations and extravagances of Mr. Swinburne's genius; but those who have an ear for the subtler harmonies of lyric poetry, know well that in all Mr. Swinburne's writings, in spite of obvious mannerisms, and minor blemishes, there is an intense reality of sublime spiritual feeling, which alone is sufficient to mark him as one of our greatest poets. If we compare his poems with those of his chief contemporaries, we shall find that although he may be inferior to them in many respects, and especially in those points on which our orthodox critics mostly insist, yet he has one poetical quality which is peculiarly and eminently his own. He does not possess Mr. Browning's great dramatic insight and wide scope of intellectual vision, nor Lord Tennyson's idyllic composure and exquisite felicity of expression;

but in place of these he has in an eminent degree a gift which they do not possess—the spirit of deep and passionate sympathy with all that is natural, elemental, primeval, and the power of expressing this spirit in words which themselves seem to be absolutely spontaneous and unpremeditated.

It would not be difficult to multiply instances of this lyric faculty; but it will be sufficient here to allude to two or three other most striking examples. It is to this same passionate inspiration that Mrs. Browning's poetry owes its unspeakable charm; it is this same spirit that at times exalts the Brontë novels (for prose has its lyrics as well as poetry) to heights untouched by other English novelists. No deep learning, no wide experience, no patient observation, no mere artistic skill, could have availed to produce such poems as *Lady Geraldine's Courtship*, *Cowper's Grave*, *Bianca among the Nightingales*, and a host of others which I need not here enumerate. The following lines, taken from *Bianca among the Nightingales*, will give a powerful instance of that divine *afflatus* with which all true lyric poetry is animated:

"The cypress stood up like a church,
  That night we felt our love would hold,
And saintly moonlight seemed to search
  And wash the whole world clean as gold;
The olives crystallised the vales,

Broad slopes until the hills grew strong:
The fireflies and the nightingales
Throbbed each to either, flame and song.
The nightingales, the nightingales.

. . . . . .

We paled with love, we shook with love,
We kissed so close we could not vow;
Till Giulio whispered, 'Sweet, above
God's Ever guarantees this Now.'
And through his words the nightingales
Drove straight and full their long clear call,
Like arrows through heroic mails,
And love was awful in it all.
The nightingales, the nightingales."

Again, if the writings of Charlotte Brontë be compared with those of George Eliot, we shall see very clearly the marked contrast between the lyrical and philosophical spirit. There is probably more thoughtful judgment and mature wisdom in a single page of *Middlemarch* than in all the works of Charlotte Brontë; yet we might look in vain through all George Eliot's writings for a passage such as the following, taken from the last pages of *Villette*:

"The skies hang full and dark—a rack sails from the west; the clouds cast themselves into strange forms—arches and broad radiations; there rise resplendent mornings—glorious, royal, purple as monarch in his state; the heavens are one flame; so wild are they, they rival battle at its thickest—so bloody, they shame Victory in her pride. I know some signs of the sky; I have noted them ever since childhood. God watch that sail! Oh! guard it!

"The wind shifts to the west. Peace, peace, 'Banshee'

—keening at every window! It will rise—it will swell—it shrieks out long: wander as I may through the house this night, I cannot lull the blast. The advancing hours make it strong; by midnight all sleepless watchers hear and fear a wild south-west storm."

To appreciate at their true value such words as these, one has need of much more than a sound intellect and good poetical "taste." The lyric spirit is possessed, as it were, of a new sense; and its independence of eye and ear may most aptly be illustrated by what naturalists tell us of the formation of a bat's wing, the nerves of which are of such fine and exquisite sensibility, as to enable it to avoid all objects in its nocturnal flight, though it receives no assistance from the sight or hearing.

But here many persons will doubtless assert that this lyrical faculty, even if we grant its existence, is by no means so valuable a gift to a writer as that of calm philosophical observation and dispassionate judgment; common sense, they say, must come first, and inspiration afterwards. I am not now concerned to disprove this assertion; my present object has been merely to show that there exists in lyric poetry something beside and beyond the ordinary poetic qualities, and totally different in kind. It is therefore idle to attempt to bind down this spirit by any critical rules, or to assert that such poetry, because it does not satisfy some arbitrary

standard of criticism, is therefore inferior or valueless. Critics always perform a useful task when they point out literary defects, and so purge away the dross, more or less of which is to be found in every poetical work; but they must not forget that a still higher and more important task is to discover the gold: the good and not the bad should be the main object of our search. It is certainly a serious error to overlook the faults of a poem which we admire; but to fail to discern the excellencies of a poem we dislike is a far graver and more irreparable blunder. For this reason the sincerest admirers are on the whole the truest critics; they alone can fully appreciate and sympathise with the spirit of the author.

In speaking of this lyrical spirit as vague and impalpable, I have not meant to imply that it is necessarily purposeless and aimless. On the contrary, it has many times been enlisted in a noble cause; seldom in any that is not noble. It is seen in its most glorious aspect when it is united with lofty and unselfish philanthropy, as in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, or with ardent love of liberty, as in Swinburne's *Songs before Sunrise.* But in many cases it is like the wind, that bloweth where it listeth: and a wise critic will then allow free scope to what he cannot control, and, if he himself cannot appreciate or understand, will at least recognise the fact that

others may be able to do so. At present it constantly happens that poems are ridiculed and disparaged for no better reason than that the critic has not the power of comprehending the subject on which he writes. Whenever I hear a critic harping on the "weakness" of Shelley's style, or the "poverty of thought" in Swinburne, or the various "fatal shortcomings" of other great poets, I am irresistibly tempted to draw his attention to that suggestive passage in *Pickwick* in which Mr. Winkle criticises so severely the quality of his skates:

"'These are very awkward skates; ain't they Sam?' inquired Mr. Winkle, staggering.

"I'm afeerd there's an orkard gen'l'man in 'em, sir,' replied Sam."

Edgar Poe's Writings.

ALTHOUGH the interest excited by some of Edgar Poe's poems, and by still more of his prose tales, may be taken as a sign that he has attained a certain kind of popularity, yet there are probably few writers who have been more strangely misjudged and misunderstood in English literary circles. Unfortunate in the circumstances of his life, he seems destined to be equally unlucky in his posthumous reputation, to which the homage of his less discriminating admirers has often been as injurious as the animadversions of hostile critics. It may sound paradoxical, yet it is none the less a fact, that he has been generally read and admired for what is least valuable in his writings, while he has been slighted or censured for what is most characteristic and original. The mere jingle of his alliterative verse, and the morbid sensationalism of his tales—these are the points which have exercised a strong fascination on some readers who have no true taste for poetry or

fiction; while on the other hand his adverse critics have been too quick to set him down as a mere rhymester and poetaster, not perceiving that they themselves are at fault in their inability to appreciate those mysteries of the poetic art, the subtle undertones and half-lights, in which Poe was so great a master. The fact is, we have been accustomed to hear at once too much of Poe and too little; too much of some particular writings and special incidents of his life which have been perseveringly forced on our notice till they lose all real significance by being isolated from the rest; too little of the general tenor of his character and style. But now with the help of Mr. Woodberry's excellent *Life of Poe* in the "American Men of Letters Series," and Mr. Ingram's English edition of his works, it is at least possible for every reader to arrive at a just estimate of Poe's genius.

It is no part of my purpose to dwell on the vexed story of Poe's life, involved as it is in countless difficulties and contradictions. It is sufficient here to say that the stories so widely circulated by Poe's "friend," Griswold, and so readily believed both in America and England, about the enormity of his misdemeanours and his orgies of intemperance, appear, on the best authority, to be always greatly exaggerated, and in many cases absolute fabrications. His life was throughout a sad one, and towards its close

it was tenfold darkened and saddened by the use of stimulants; yet he has at least the same excuse as that advanced by De Quincey, when seeking to palliate his own use of opium, that he erred through a desperate desire to find a temporary escape from the pangs of poverty and sickness.

There are one or two events of Poe's life which call for special notice as having strongly influenced his writings in a particular direction. Of these the first is the death of Mrs. Helen Stannard, the mother of a young scoolfellow, and the friend and adviser of Poe in his boyish sorrows. It has been pointed out that the extreme grief which he felt at the death of this lady, a grief which drove him to haunt her grave nightly for months, may furnish an explanation of much that is otherwise unaccountably gloomy and terrible in the character of his works, and especially of the too frequent descriptions of churchyard scenes and premature burials. One cannot but call to mind those words of Keats, so eminently applicable to Poe:

> "Who hath not loiter'd in a green churchyard,
> And let his spirit, like a demon mole,
> Work through the clayey soil and gravel hard,
> To see skull, coffin'd bones, and funeral stole?"

Poe had often loitered thus, and his mind was consequently tinged, even from boyhood, with a

sombre and funereal cast. But still more important in their effects on his imagination were the lingering illness and death of his young wife, Virginia. The idea of the loss of a fair being, slowly dying of consumption in the bloom of youth and beauty, is one that strikes the keynote of many of his poems and tales, especially *Annabel Lee* and *Eleonora;* while the fact that some of the tales referring to this subject were written before the death of his wife shows that there was already in Poe's mind an intuitive foreknowledge of the calamity that was destined to befall him ; indeed, he expressly states in one of his letters[1] that for six years, during the recurrences of his wife's illness, he felt all the agonies of her death. We see both in his poetry and his prose how constantly he hovers round this subject, the great central sorrow of his life and writings.

Death being the power that chiefly influenced the early imagination of the young poet, it is not to be wondered that his style is often melancholy and morbid. There is much that is surpassingly beautiful in Poe's work, but there is also much that is distressing and unwholesome. The atmosphere of his writings is sickly and artificial, more so than that of either Coleridge or De Quincey, to whom in several respects he is somewhat akin. He has a certain grim humour

[1] Woodberry's "Life of Poe," p. 170.

of his own, which lends a racy charm to many of the tales; but on the whole the sadness of tone is largely predominant, the luxuriant splendour of his word-painting serving only to bring out more strongly the great central gloom. He possesses much intensity and concentration of power, but little freedom or width of scope in the choice and treatment of his subjects; there is, accordingly, nothing to relieve the oppressive sense of disaster and despair which broods over most of his works. Yet, in spite of these inherent failings, it would be a great mistake to conclude hastily, as some English critics have done, that Poe's writings can be set aside as wholly faulty and unimportant. Many readers are doubtless unable to sympathise with a writer whose choice of subjects is so limited and whose methods are so peculiar; yet to others it will appear that the narrowness of scope is compensated for by the minuteness and perfection of the workmanship. Nor can it be justly urged that the morbid tendency of Poe's writings is in itself a sufficient plea for their condemnation; for if we were to admit that what is known as "a healthy tone" is not only desirable but absolutely essential to literary excellence, we should find ourselves compelled to reject also the masterpieces of Coleridge and De Quincey, whose writings show traces of the power of opium quite as clearly as do those of Poe.

In his essays on *The Poetic Principle* and *The Philosophy of Composition*, Poe has stated his own opinion on the question of poetry; and it is interesting to read his account of the several stages in the conception and execution of his best known poem *The Raven*. The main principle he lays down is that a poem should be short, and that it should be so thought out and prearranged, before being actually written, as to produce on the mind of the reader a clear, sudden, and complete impression. The sole legitimate province of a poem he declares to be Beauty, and the tone of the highest manifestation of Beauty he finds to be Sadness; finally he selects the Refrain as the most suitable vehicle for the expression of his poetical ideas. On this narrow and arbitrary principle Poe worked in the composition not only of his *Raven*, but of nine-tenths of his other writings. It is not surprising that writing under such conditions he produced much that is of little value; but none the less it is futile to deny the excellence of his best work. We may say of Poe, as it has been said of Coleridge, that "all he did excellently might be bound up in twenty pages, but it should be bound in pure gold." In this class must be placed such poems as *Lenore*, *Annabel Lee*, *Ulalume*, *The Sleeper*, *The Raven*, and *To One in Paradise*, which are all inspired by the leading idea already mentioned, the untimely

death of a beautiful and beloved woman. Add to this list a few other poems, on more general subjects such as *Dreamland*, *For Annie*, *To Helen*, *The Haunted Palace*, *The Conqueror Worm*, and we can scarcely refuse to give Poe credit for high poetical genius. It is sometimes asserted that these poems are little better than "sense swooning into nonsense." That may be true, if we use the negative term in its literal and not opprobrious meaning; but then it is equally true of *Kubla Khan*, and much of Coleridge's poetry, true also of some of Shelley's writings and not a little of Swinburne's. The measure of success in poetry is ultimately the impression created on the mind of the reader, and this impression may be made by what is mysterious and indefinite, as well as by what is logical and well defined. It is beside the point to insist that such poems as *Annabel Lee* and *Ulalume* are filmy and impalpable; their details are undoubtedly so, but the final and ultimate impression is not necessarily a feeble one, to those at any rate who have an ear for the subtle melodies of lyric poetry. In the case of *Ulalume*, for example, the poem which is most often selected for adverse criticism, the general meaning is surely not quite so obscure as the critics appear to find it. The subject is the same as that of which Wordsworth has treated in one of his finest sonnets, the sudden recollection of a heavy

calamity, the anniversary of a death, which had been for the moment forgotten. The Psyche of Poe's *Ulalume* is the same as the "faithful love" of Wordsworth's sonnet, the trusty monitor who first recalls what the mind of the bereaved poet had otherwise overlooked.

> "Love, faithful love, recalled thee to my mind—
> But how could I forget thee? Through what power,
> Even for the least division of an hour,
> Have I been so beguiled as to be blind
> To my most grievous loss?"

If this leading idea be kept in view, I do not think the readers of *Ulalume* need be reduced to regarding it as mere sound without sense, though it may be admitted that its details baffle critical explanation, and that the use of the Refrain is here carried to its extreme limits. Poe must indeed be considered the poet of the Refrain, for who has ever used it so persistently yet so successfully as he? Four of his chief poems, *The Raven*, *The Bells*, *Annabel Lee*, and *Ulalume*, owe their effect directly to this metrical arrangement; while in many others the ear of the reader is charmed from time to time by a rhythmical recurrence of sound, which seems to breathe an echo from some spiritual world. To those who are gifted with the power of appreciating it, this mystic tone is the most valuable quality possessed by Poe as a writer; though

there have always been, and will always continue to be, critics who, for this very reason, take him to task for his lack of distinctness and coherence.

Turning now to Poe's prose tales, we find his own opinion on this form of composition very clearly stated in his essay on Nathaniel Hawthorne. He strongly urges that a tale, like a poem, should be brief, "requiring from half an hour to one or two hours in its perusal." The author is thus able, and thus only, to create a concise and lasting effect; for "during the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer's control; there are no external or extrinsic influences resulting from weariness or interruption." This brevity is the quality that Poe admired in Hawthorne's *Twice-told Tales;* and on this principle most of his own prose-writing was based, though there is certainly an exception—and, in the opinion of most readers, rather an unfortunate one—in the case of his rather long and wearisome story, *Arthur Gordon Pym.* In prose, as in poetry, the most important element in the composition of Poe's works was mystery. A large portion of his most remarkable tales are essentially mysterious, many of them tinged with the same love of death-scenes and funereal shadows which is so marked a characteristic of his poems. He must surely have been thinking of himself when he penned the following passage in *The Murders in the*

Rue Morgue; at any rate, one could not desire a more accurate description of his genius. "It was a freak of fancy in my friend (for what else shall I call it?) to be enamoured of the Night for her own sake. At the first dawn of the morning we closed all the massive shutters of our old building, lighting a couple of tapers, which, strongly perfumed, threw out only the ghastliest and feeblest of rays. By the aid of these we then busied our souls in dreams, reading, writing, or conversing, until warned by the clock of the advent of the true darkness," All who have read *Ligeia*, or *The Fall of the House of Usher*, or *The Masque of the Red Death*, will remember those weird effects of lurid word-painting, the pentagonal chambers; the vaulted and fretted ceilings, with their elaborate carving; the blackness of oaken floors; the armorial trophies hung on the lofty walls; the vast folds of the massive velvet tapestry; the long narrow-pointed windows, with trellised and tinted panes, through which fall mysterious gleams of encrimsoned light; the huge censer; the ottomans; the golden candelabra; the gigantic ebony clocks; and all the rest of the ghostly nocturnal paraphernalia with which Poe loved to bedeck his stories. In this unnatural and, it must be added, unwholesome atmosphere, amid this strange scenery and grotesque imagery, is laid the plot of many a wild and startling tale, among

which no subjects are commoner than those of premature burial and sentience after death. Of all such stories the best is probably *The Fall of the House of Usher*, in which the absorbing interest is skilfully maintained from beginning to end, while each phase of the tragedy serves in its turn to lend additional weight to the final impression. With breathless attention and increasing awe, we follow the fortunes of the ill-fated house, as narrated by the friend who has been summoned to cheer his old school-fellow, Roderick Usher, in his morbid and unhappy isolation. We feel from the first the foreboding of intolerable gloom; from the journey through the dreary tract, where the clouds hung low in the sky, to the arrival at the melancholy mansion, surrounded by its dark, peculiar atmosphere, and the meeting with Usher himself, a prey to constitutional malady and superstition. Very powerful, too, are the descriptions of Usher's solitary studies, his strange improvised dirges, and mysterious pictures "bathed in a ghastly and inappropriate splendour;" and, above all, the references to the Lady Madeline. The manner in which the interest of the tale is made to centre on Usher's ill-fated sister, without her actual introduction on the scene; the account of her burial in the vault, and the storm that afterwards shook the casements of the house—all this is marvellously

contrived to suggest and enhance the final catastrophe, and may challenge comparison with the best work of the great masters of mystery and horror, from Webster to Hawthorne. Next to *The Fall of the House of Usher* should be placed *William Wilson*, a piece of allegorical autobiography which in conception and style bears a singular resemblance to some of Hawthorne's writings. Its subject is the struggle between the Will and the Conscience, terminating in the death of the latter, and the consequent degradation of the former. The story is told in Poe's most effective manner, and there is a strange charm and fascination in his account of the mysterious stranger, his *alter ego*, his second self, who, bearing the same name and resembling him in voice and feature, dogs his steps and thwarts his plans from childhood to manhood, until, in a fit of fury, he strikes his persecutor dead, only to find that he has destroyed all that was most dear to him in himself. Perhaps the best-known of all Poe's tales is *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, which, together with *The Mystery of Marie Rogêt*, was the outcome of his natural liking for the enigmatical and his extraordinary acuteness in unravelling the secrets of the human mind. It is Poe's misfortune, or perhaps we should say his punishment, that the morbidly sensational element of his stories should have proved to be

their chief attraction for posterity; but even those readers who have little relish for anything that savours of the "Newgate Calendar," must admire the wonderful analytic power by which the plot of these stories is step by step disclosed, and the literary genius which lends a charm to what would otherwise be merely hideous and repulsive. In this respect *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* and *The Mystery of Marie Rogêt* are scarcely surpassed in English literature, except by De Quincey's *Postcript* to his essay on *Murder*, which stands unique and inimitable among all histories of crime. Under the same heading of mysterious tales must be classed *Ligeia*,—which Poe himself, not without some reason, regarded as his masterpiece—*Morella*, *The Masque of the Red Death*, and several other stories, including those where the influence of Dickens is observable, as in *The Pit and the Pendulum* and the *Tell-tale Heart*, some of the passages of which might easily pass for the handiwork of the author of *Barnaby Rudge* and the *Madman's Story*.

It is a relief to turn from works of this kind to the tender and pathetic *Eleonora*, the loveliest and most beautiful of all Poe's prose writings, perfect both in the purity of its conception and the delicacy of its workmanship. Its subject is almost the same as that of *Annabel Lee*, of which it is, in fact, a prose

counterpart, describing, though in a somewhat more allegorical form, the calmest and happiest portion of Poe's life, until the loss of his child-wife, Virginia. It is a rhapsody of melodious sound, inspired by purest feeling, and makes us regret that Poe did not write more in the same style.

The second class of Poe's tales may be called the scientific, or, more correctly, the pseudo-scientific. The leading characteristic of these is the manner in which he handles some scientific *data*, making them the groundwork of his fabric, on which he so skilfully builds up a fiction that it is difficult to determine the exact point at which fact ends and fancy begins. Of these stories by far the best is *The Descent into the Maelstrom*, in every way one of his most effective tales, based on the scientific deduction that a cylindrical body, revolving in a whirlpool, must offer more resistance to the suction of the water than other bodies of equal bulk. On this basis he founds his story of a sailor's safe descent into the great Norwegian whirlpool by means of clinging to a cylindrical water-cask; and preposterous as the idea seems, when thus baldly stated, such is the power of literary genius that in Poe's story it seem scarcely improbable or grotesque. In the same category, though greatly inferior in power, must be placed *The Adventure of Hans Pfaal*, and the other

ballooning stories ; also those that deal with the subjects of alchemy, mesmerism, and cryptography. *The Gold Bug* for instance, is one of Poe's best tales, and exhibits his extraordinary ingenuity in constructing and solving enigmatical ciphers, a mental quality doubtless closely akin to the power he possessed of unravelling criminal secrets. In *The Gold-Bug* as well as in his essay on cryptography, he asserts that "human ingenuity cannot concoct a cipher which human ingenuity cannot resolve." The stories that treat of mesmeric phenomena are the most terrible that Poe wrote, and I think that even his warmest admirers must admit that he was guilty of unpardonable bad taste in such tales as *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar*, and *Mesmeric Revelation. Some Words with a Mummy* is less objectionable, on account of the humorous spirit that pervades it, and relieves it of the sense of horror that makes the two other stories well-nigh intolerable,

This mention of Poe's humour brings us to the third class of his writing, the humorous. These, though inconsiderable in number, are so excellent in quality that it is odd they should be so little known among the many readers who, in their search for amusing literature, are fain to content themselves with far less salient wit. *The Devil in the Belfry* is a masterpiece of good-humoured satire on the ludicrous side of

Dutch life. Nothing could be better than the description of the borough of Vondervotteimittis, with its tiny red-brick houses and prim inhabitants, who have little else to do but attend to their clocks and cabbages, until they suffer an overwhelming calamity in the mysterious derangement of their belfry and striking of "dirteen o'clock." Scarcely less admirable in their keen humour are "*The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fether*, *How to Write a Blackwood Article*, *Never Bet the Devil your Head*, and *Hop-Frog*, which, however, has also a strong admixture of the mysterious and horrible.

In addition to his poems and prose-tales, Poe left a considerable number of miscellaneous essays and criticisms. In his essays on *The Philosophy of Composition*, *The Poetic Principle*, and *The Rationale of Verse*, his views on poetry and the laws of metre are fully set forth. Of the numerous critiques on contemporary authors, chiefly American, the most noteworthy are those on Nathaniel Hawthorne, Charles Dickens, and Mrs. Browning. Poe had a high admiration of Mrs. Browning's genius, and in the essay in question awards her no stinted praise; yet there is also much temperate criticism of certain mannerisms and blemishes which so exact and methodical a writer as Poe could not fail to resent. We are not surprised to find from several passages in his works that he considered

Tennyson the greatest of all poets; for Poe was himself essentially an artist, and artistic finish and perfection were the foremost qualities, according to his judgment, in poetic composition. The essay on Dickens is chiefly taken up with an analysis of *Barnaby Rudge*—a novel especially interesting to Poe, and closely akin to his own writings both in subject and style, as may be seen by the introduction of that "grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird," the raven, and other points of similarity. It is said that after the publication of the earlier chapters of *Barnaby Rudge* Poe wrote a "prospective notice" of the story, in which the events that were to come were foretold with extraordinary precision. Almost the last literary work on which Poe was occupied was *Eureka*, at once the most ambitious and the most inexplicable of his productions. In the pathetic dedication "to the few who love me and whom I love," he expressly states that he wishes this "book of truths," to be regarded as a poem rather than a scientific treatise; yet it may fairly be doubted if an attempt to "take a survey of the universe" offers a very suitable field for poetic enterprise.

I have already remarked that Poe's works present some points of similarity to Hawthorne's. There are, in fact, several of Poe's stories which one could almost believe to have

been written by Hawthorne, while it would not be difficult to make selections from *Twice-told Tales* and *Mosses from an Old Manse*, which might well pass as the writings of Poe. It can hardly be questioned that Hawthorne was the greater genius; for he is distinctly superior to Poe, both in the scope of his imaginative power and in delicacy of sentiment. This may perhaps be partly accounted for by the fact that while Hawthorne led a life of unbroken leisure and opportunity for quiet contemplation, Poe was seldom free from pressing embarrassments and domestic anxiety; the former wrote for the actual pleasure of writing and to gratify his literary taste, while the latter was chiefly concerned in staving off poverty and imminent want. It is not surprising therefore, that Poe should have been less scrupulous in his choice and treatment of subjects for his pen, and that he should more often have violated the laws of literary taste. In spite of his strong predilection for the mysterious, he did not possess the art of enshrouding his characters in that filmy and half-spiritual phantasy which lends so great a charm to Hawthorne's romances; on the contrary, his stories, being more sensational than those of Hawthorne, tend rather to degenerate into the horrible and grotesque. The same difference is observable in their humorous writings; Poe's humour being keen, pungent, and

sharply defined, while Hawthorne's is shy, delicate, and unobtrusive. Nevertheless, inferior though he is in these points, Poe is no unworthy rival of his gifted contemporary and fellow-countryman, with whom he may share the merit of having developed and perfected the short prose story in a way few English writers have done.

To those who intelligently and sympathetically study any or all of Poe's writings one thing must, I think, become abundantly evident: that they are reading the works of a man of real genius. Whatever his defects and peculiarities may be—and they are certainly nnmerous enough—it can hardly be denied that he possesses the rare faculty, which no accomplishments can teach and no diligence can acquire, of giving life and reality to the scenes and characters he depicts. It must be confessed it is a strange, uncanny, twilight world to which he introduces us; a region filled with an oppressive sense of death and decay:

> "The air is damp, and hush'd, and close
> As a sick man's room when he taketh repose
> An hour before death."

Yet though we are everywhere haunted, in the poems and prose stories alike, by this morbid and autumnal atmosphere, which chills the heart and fills it with a presage of wintry desolation,

we cannot refuse our tribute of praise to the author of so vivid an impression. The spirit of Poe's genius was narrow, concentrated, intense; his success is largely due to the power with which he harped on a few particular themes, and to the fantastic beauty of the weird imagery in which he clothed his ideas. His place in literature is, in fact, unique; both in the matter of his writings and in his methods of expression he stands alone. It would be affectation to claim for him a position in the foremost rank; but though he cannot be classed among the greatest, he cannot fairly be excluded from the company of the great. He has the merit of doing whatever he attempts to do with exquisite harmony and conciseness; and it is this perfection of workmanship, aided by the subtle and suggestive melody of his language, that constitutes his chief claim to immortality.

Henry D. Thoreau.

"Mr. THOREAU dined with us. He is a singular character —a young man with much of wild, original nature still remaining in him; and so far as he is sophisticated, it is in a way and method of his own. He is as ugly as sin, long-nosed, queer-mouthed, and with uncouth and somewhat rustic, though courteous, manners, corresponding very well with such an exterior. But his ugliness is of an honest and agreeable fashion and becomes him much better than beauty."

THIS extract from Nathaniel Hawthorne's Diary in 1842 describes Thoreau as he appeared, three years before his retirement to Walden, to one who was scarcely likely to do full justice to a genius so widely dissimilar to his own. The gifted inhabitant of the Old Manse, whose recent experiences at Brook Farm had led him to look with suspicion on all that savoured of enthusiasm for social reform, and to view everything from a purely literary and artistic standpoint, could scarcely be expected to appreciate very warmly the character of a young enthusiast who had declared open war against

custom and society and was preaching a crusade against every sort of luxury and self-indulgence. Still less could the ordinary American citizen understand that novel gospel which bid him dispense with most of those things which he had been brought up to regard as the necessary comforts of life. Accordingly we are not surprised to find that Thoreau's doctrines obtained but little recognition during his lifetime; he was regarded with profound respect by a few select friends, Emerson among the number; but to the many he appeared merely eccentric and quixotic, his sojourn at Walden gaining him the reputation of a hermit and misanthrope. Even now, a quarter of a century after his death, he is not known as he deserves to be either in America or this country; most readers ignore or misunderstand him; and it is left to a small but increasing number of admirers to do justice to one of the most remarkable and original characters that America has yet produced. Thoreau was pre-eminently the apostle of "plain living and high thinking;" and to those who are indifferent to this doctrine he must ever appeal in vain: on the other hand, those who have realized the blessings of a simple and heathful life can never feel sufficient gratitude or admiration for such a book as *Walden*, which is rightly regarded as the masterpiece of Thoreau's genius.

One of the causes that have contributed to the general lack of interest in Thoreau's writings is the want of a good memoir of his life. Emerson's account of him* is excellent as far as it goes, but it is very short and cursory; while the other lives,† though each is not without some merit of its own, are hardly satisfactory enough to become really popular. As so little is known of Thoreau by most people, it may be well, before I proceed to an examination of his writings and philosophy, to enumerate very briefly the leading facts of his life. He was born in 1817 in Concord, Massachusetts, his father being a manufacturer of lead pencils in that place. He was educated at Harvard College, and after leaving the University taught for a short time in a private school, but soon becoming weary of the educational profession he devoted himself to his father's trade till he had completely mastered it in all its details. Then, finding that the true aim and object of his ambition was to live a simple, natural, open-air life, he became, as he himself has humorously recorded, "self-appointed inspector of snow-

* Prefixed to Thoreau's *Excursions*. Messrs. Ticknor and Fields: Boston.

† *Thoreau, His Life and Aims*, by H. A. Page. Chatto and Windus. *Thoreau, The Poet-Naturalist*, by W. Ellery Channing. Boston. *Life of Thoreau* (in American Men of Letters Series), by F. B. Sanborn.

storms and rain-storms," and gave himself up to that intimate communion with nature from which he seemed to derive all his intellectual strength. In 1845 he built himself a hut on the shores of Walden Pond, a short distance from Concord, and there lived for over two years. After this sojourn in the woods he returned to Concord, and the quiet tenor of his life was afterwards only interrupted by occasional visits to the Maine Woods, Canada, Cape Cod, and other places of interest, of which journeys he has left an account in his books. He died in 1862 from a disease of the lungs, the result of a severe cold taken through unwise exposure in winter.

It has been remarked by some critics, who take an unfavourable view of Thoreau's philosophy, that his life was strikingly devoid of those wide experiences and opportunities of studying mankind, which alone can justify an individual in arraigning, as Thoreau did, the whole system of modern society.* It should be remembered, however, that he possessed that keen native wisdom and practical insight, which, combined with fearless self-inspection, are often a better form of education than the most approved methods. Like all other enthusiasts, Thoreau sometimes taught a half-truth rather than a whole one; but that does not alter the

* *Vide* Lowell's Essay on Thoreau, in *My Study Windows.*

fact that his teaching was true as far as it went. In his life-protest against the luxury and self-indulgence which he saw everywhere around him, he no doubt occasionally over-stated his own case, and ignored some objections which might reasonably have been raised against his doctrines; but in the main his conclusions are generally sound and unimpeachable. Self-taught, time-saving, and laconic, he struck by a sort of unerring instinct at the very root of the question which he chanced to be discussing, not pausing to weigh objections, or allowing any difficulties to divert him from his aim. We may now proceed to consider the chief features of his philosophy.

As regards religious views, we find that Thoreau unhesitatingly rejected all theological dogmatism, being convinced of the hollowness of all traditionary belief; "no way of thinking or doing," he says, "however ancient, can be trusted without proof." In a remarkable passage in the *Week* he expressly states his disbelief in the doctrines of Christianity, for which, in all his wanderings, he "never came across the least vestige of authority." But it must not be supposed from this that Thoreau was deficient in reverence and the true religious spirit; on the contrary, he was, in the highest and truest sense, a profoundly religious man. If any one doubts this, let him read Thoreau's

account of his visit to the cathedral of Notre Dame at Montreal,* and his emotion on passing from the noisy mob and rattling carriages into the quiet religious atmosphere of this "great cave in the midst of a city," this church "where the priest is the least part, where you do your own preaching, where the universe preaches to you and can be heard." Equally profound was Thoreau's reverence for the old primeval philosophies and religions. Confucius and Buddha were not mere names to him; he was never weary of reading and quoting the "Bhagvat Geeta," the "Vishnu Purana," "Sarma," "Saadi," and similar books. The new Testament he pronounces "an invaluable book," which had the greater charm for him because he began to study it later than the rest, having at first been prejudiced against it by the infliction of Sabbath-school teaching; he used to read it again and again, and naively remarks that he should have loved dearly to read it aloud to his friends, had they not shown evident signs of weariness under the ordeal. From this, and many other passages in his works, it appears that Thoreau was far from holding any materialistic or anti-religious ways of thought; he had unbounded belief in the perfectibility of man, and the resurrection of a new and beautiful life. "Poet-Naturalist" as

* "A Yankee in Canada," p. 12.

he was, he drew deep lessons from his observation of the power and kindliness of nature.

"As I stand over the insect crawling amid the pine needles on the forest floor, and endeavouring to conceal itself from my sight, and ask myself why it will cherish those humble thoughts, and hide its head from me who might, perhaps, be its benefactor, and impart to its race some cheering information, I am reminded of the greater Benefactor and Intelligence that stands over me, the human insect."

But he declines to take man's word on subjects that are beyond man's intelligence; he will allow no schemes and formulas to obstruct his view of the sky; he will see "no rafter, not even a cobweb, against the heavens." A religious man Thoreau certainly was, but not in the sectarian sense of "religious." "There is more religion," he says, "in men's science than there is science in their religion."

Thoreau has been called a Stoic; and there is undoubtedly much in his philosophy that is akin to the spirit of ancient Stoicism. With him, as with Epictetus, conformity to nature is the basis of his teaching, and he has been finely called by Emerson the "Bachelor of Nature," a term which might well have been applied to many of the old Greek and Roman Stoics. It is a remarkable fact that there is rarely any mention of love in his writings, but friendship, as with the Stoics, is a common theme, this subject being treated of at considerable length

in the *Week.** His main point of similarity, however, to the Stoic philosophers is to be found in his ceaseless protest against all kinds of luxury and superfluous comforts. Like Socrates, he could truly say, on seeing the abundance of other people's possessions, "How many things are there that I do *not* desire!" and every page of *Walden* bears testimony to the sincerity of this feeling. The keynote of the book is the sentiment expressed in Goldsmith's words, "Man wants but little here below," with the difference that Thoreau did not merely *talk* of Arcadian simplicity, in the manner that was so common with literary men a century ago, but carried his theories into practical effect. His furniture at Walden consisted of a bed, a table, a desk, three chairs, a looking-glass, a pair of tongs, and a few plates, knives, forks, and cooking-utensils. He had three pieces of limestone on his desk, but finding they required to be dusted daily, he threw them out of the window, preferring to spend the time in dusting "the furniture of his mind." A lady once offered him a mat, but for the same reason this offer was declined. His dress, diet, and whole system of life were framed on similar

* It is stated in the Preface to Mr. Stevenson's essay on Thoreau (*Familiar Studies of Men and Books*) on the authority of Dr. Japp, that Thoreau had been disappointed in love, and that the discourse on friendship was in reality an "anodyne to lull his pains."

principles. When asked at table what dish he preferred, he answered "the nearest," and he was surprised at the anxiety which people usually manifest to have new and unpatched clothes rather than a sound conscience. In short, his utterances on this subject of superfluous comforts were such as would have made Dr. Samuel Johnson's hair stand on end with amazement and indignation had they been promulgated on one of the many occasions when the Doctor used to demonstrate to his audience the beneficial results of luxury, in the full confidence that he was teaching a great economic truth! Freedom from artificial wants, and a life in harmony with nature, are again and again insisted upon by Thoreau as the basis of all true happiness; and these he certainly pursued with unfaltering consistency through his own singular career. In this sense he was a true Stoic philosopher. But there are also important differences. Thoreau was free from that coldness of heart which was too often a characteristic of the Stoics of old, and was animated by a far wider and nobler spirit of humanity. It is true that there was a certain reserve in his manner which made his acquaintances a little afraid of him, and caused one of his friends to remark, "I *love* Henry, but I cannot *like* him." But this existed only in his manner; in heart he was at all times thoroughly kindly and sympathetic. There is a passage in

his diary* where he regrets his own tendency to use more harsh and cynical expressions about mankind than he really intended, owing to the somewhat paradoxical style of conversation in which he indulged, and which his friends seemed to expect from him. But his enthusiastic admiration for the heroes of the anti-slavery agitation was a proof that he was quite free from the coldness of a merely theoretic Stoicism; indeed he has a just claim to be considered one of the leaders of the great humanitarian movement of this century, his sympathy with the lower animals being one of the most extraordinary features of his character. He had been influenced far too deeply by the teaching of Channing, Emerson, and the transcendental school, to permit of his being classed as a mere cynic or misanthrope.

"Simplify, simplify," was the cry that was for ever on Thoreau's lips, in his life-protest against the increasing luxury and extravagance and hypocrisy of the age. The lesson taught us by *Walden* is that there are two ways of becoming rich; one—the method usually adopted—by conforming to the conventional laws of society, and amassing sufficient money to enable one to purchase all the "comforts" of which men think they have need; the other—a simpler and more

* *Early Spring in Massachusetts*, p. 214.

expeditious process—by limiting one's desires to those things which are really necessary; in Thoreau's own words, "A man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone." It is habit only which makes us regard as necessary a great part of the equipment of civilized life, and an experience such as that of Thoreau during his sojourn at Walden goes to prove that we might be healthier and happier if we could bring ourselves to dispense with many of our superfluous and artificial wants, and thus substitute a manly independence for our present childish dependence on the labour of others. Thoreau was not a foolish champion of savage and barbarous isolation against the appliances and improvements of civilized society; it is not denied by him that on the whole the civilized state is far preferable to the savage condition; but he shows that in some ways the increase of artificial wants, and of skill in supplying them, has proved a curse rather than a blessing to the human race, and he points out an easy and perfectly practicable way out of this difficulty. Every one may add to his own riches, and may lessen his own labour, and that of others, in the treadmill of competitive existence, by the simple expedient of living less artificially. There are few indeed who, if they go to the root of the matter, and cast aside the prejudices of custom and convention, will not

discover that they could be equally happy—nay, far happier, without much of what is now most expensive in their houses, in the way of furniture, clothing, and diet. Thoreau discovered by his own experiment,* that by working about six weeks in the year, he could meet all the expenses of living, and have free for study the whole of his winters as well as most of his summers, a discovery which may throw considerable light on the solution of certain social problems in our own country. Even if we allow an ample margin for the peculiarity of his case, and the favourable conditions under which he made his experiment, the conclusion seems to be unavoidable that the burden of labour which falls on the majority of the human race is not only very unfairly distributed, but in itself unnecessarily heavy.

Thoreau cannot be called a Socialist; he was rather an Individualist of the most uncompromising type. One of his most striking characteristics was his strong contempt for the orthodox social virtues of "charity" and "philanthropy," which lead men—so he thought—to attempt a cheap method of improving their fellow-creatures without any real sacrifice or reform on their own side. In no part of *Walden* is the writing more vigorous and trenchant than when Thoreau is discussing the "philanthropic

* *Walden*, pp. 75-77.

enterprises" in which some of his fellow-townsmen reproachfully invited him to join. "Doing good," he declares, is one of the professions that are full; and if he knew for a certainty that a man was coming to his house with the design of doing him good, he should run for his life, for he would rather suffer evil the natural way. So too with charity:

"It may be that he who bestows the largest amount of time and money on the needy, is doing the utmost by his mode of life to produce that misery which he strives in vain to relieve. Some show their kindness to the poor by employing them in their kitchens. Would they not be kinder if they employed themselves there?"

We are not surprised to find that Thoreau's favourite modern author was Carlyle, the philosophy of Work (not in the commercial sense) being one that would eminently commend itself to the very practical mind of the author of *Walden*. With Ruskin he is in some respects even more akin; indeed, as a castigator of the faults of modern civilization and artificial society, he occupies in America a position very similar to that of Ruskin in England. There are many whole passages in *Walden* which are strikingly Ruskinian in their manner of thought and expression; as for instance the following: *

"Nature has no human inhabitant who appreciates her. The birds with their plumage and their notes are in harmony with the flowers, but what youth or maiden conspires with

* Page 216.

the wild luxuriant beauty of Nature? She flourishes most alone, afar from the towns where they reside. Talk of heaven! ye disgrace earth."

Again the resemblance is very striking when we find Thoreau inveighing against the luxury of the railroad car, with its divans and ottomans and velvet cushions and "a *malaria* all the way."

"That devilish Iron Horse," he exclaims,* "whose ear-rending neigh is heard throughout the town, he it is that has browsed off all the woods on Walden shore: that Trojan horse, with a thousand men in his belly, introduced by mercenary Greeks."

Many, too, are his strictures on the monstrous ugliness of recent American architecture, and his meditations on the sacred delight of a man building his own dwelling, as he himself did at Walden, and lingering lovingly over foundation, doors, windows, hearth, and every other detail. When he considers how flimsily modern houses are in general built, paid for or not paid for, as the case may be, he expresses his wonder that "the floor does not give way under the visitor while he is admiring the gewgaws upon the mantelpiece, and let him through to the cellar, to some solid and honest, though earthy, foundation." Like Ruskin again, Thoreau declines to yield homage to the supremacy of the nineteenth century, even on

* Page 208.

the score of such boasted modern inventions as the Telegraph and Post Office, for he insists that he only received one or two letters in all his life that were worth the postage, and that the Telegraph cannot greatly benefit those who, it may be, have nothing important to communicate. For newspapers also, and all the trivialities of newspaper gossip, he had a profound contempt, caring nothing to read of men robbed or murdered, houses blown up, vessels wrecked, or cows run over on the railroad, because he could discover nothing memorable in this. Even books were not always found desirable: there being times when he "could not afford to sacrifice the bloom of the present moment to any work,"—a remark which reminds one of Ruskin's statement that he never reads in the spring-time. In like manner Thoreau was in no way interested in the ordinary conversation of "society;" for, as he characteristically observes, "a goose is a goose still, dress it as you will." The author of *Fors Clavigera* has there put it on record that he could never contemplate a visit to a country which has no castles; if however he had visited America during Thoreau's lifetime, I think he might have found a compensation even for this great disadvantage. At any rate, he might have met one kindred spirit across the Atlantic, one man who cared so little for party politics that he never voted,

and who, amidst all the hurry and fluster of his enterprising countrymen, preferred travelling on foot to being jerked along on a railroad.

Mr. Lowell, in an essay on Thoreau in *My Study Windows*, finds fault with him for this hostility to the tendency of his age. He complains of his exaggerated idea of self-importance, which led him (according to the critic's view) to prize a lofty way of thinking, "not so much because it was good in itself as because he wished few to share it with him." I think this is very unfair to Thoreau, and due to a complete lack of sympathy with the spirit in which he wrote. Still more surprising is the assertion that Thoreau was the victim of a morbid self-consciousness, and that his didactic style was the outcome of an unhealthy mind! It is an unprofitable task for an admirer of a great man to combat charges such as these, which are only another proof, if proof were needed, of the fact that one man of genius is often lamentably and ludicrously unable to recognise and appreciate the merits of another, and that the best writers are often the most erroneous critics. It is impossible to estimate rightly any literary work, unless one is to some extent in sympathy with the aims and objects of the author; a qualification which Mr. Lowell certainly does not possess in the case of Thoreau. The culminating absurdity of his

criticism is reached when he asserts that Thoreau "had no humour." The author of *Walden* destitute of humour! Even Mr. Matthew Arnold's recent *dictum*, that Shelley's literary immortality will be due to his prose writings rather than his poems, must yield the place of honour among the curiosities of criticism to this amazing and unsurpassable utterance on the part of the author of the *Biglow Papers.*

There is one aspect of Thoreau's teaching which is scarcely mentioned by his biographers, though it is of considerable importance in forming a just estimate of his character; I refer to his humanitarian views. His hatred of war is very strongly expressed in those passages where he condemns the iniquitous attack which the United States were then making on Mexico; war, he says, is "a damnable business;" since those concerned in it, "soldiers, colonel, captain, corporal, powder-monkeys, and all," are in reality peaceably inclined, and are forced to fight against their common sense and consciences.* Of his detestation of the system of slavery I shall have occasion to speak further on. But Thoreau went much further than this; his humanity was shown not only in his relation to men, but also in his dealings with

* *Essay on Civil Disobedience.*

the lower animals. Emerson tells us that, though a naturalist, Thoreau used neither trap nor gun—a fact which must have been independently noticed by all readers of *Walden* or the diaries. It was his habit to eat no flesh: though with characteristic frankness he confesses to having once slaughtered and devoured a wood-chuck which ravaged his bean field. He laughs at the farmer who tells him that it is not possible to live on vegetable food alone, walking at that very time behind the oxen, "which, with vegetable-made bones, jerk him and his lumbering plough along in spite of every obstacle." Yet at the same time, it must be admitted that he was not a consistent vegetarian, for we find constant mention of his fishing in Walden Pond, and his dinner was sometimes composed of "a mess of fish." This apparent contradiction in Thoreau's dietetic philosophy is explained in that chapter of *Walden* which is headed "Higher Laws," where we find the fullest statement of his views on the humanitarian question. He begins by remarking that he finds in himself two instincts—one towards a higher and more spiritual life; the other, the hunting-instinct, towards a primitive and savage state. He reverences both of these instincts, being of opinion that there is "a period in the history of individuals, as of the race, when the hunters are the best men." It

is natural, he thinks, that boys and youths should wish to shoulder a fowling-piece and betake themselves to the woods; but (and here is the essence of Thoreau's teaching on this subject) "at last, if he has the seeds of a better life in him, he distinguishes his proper objects, as a poet or naturalist it may be, and leaves the gun and fish-pole behind." Thoreau himself had sold his gun long before his sojourn at Walden, and though he did not feel the same scruple about fishing, he nevertheless confesses that he could not fish "without falling off a little in self-respect." This leads him to dwell on the whole question of food, and he states his own opinion as being very strongly in favour of a purely vegetarian diet, which is at once more cleanly, more economical, and more moral than the usual system of flesh-food.* "Whatever my own practice may be," he adds "I have no doubt that it is a part of the destiny of the human race, in its gradual inprovement, to leave off eating animals, as surely as the savage tribes have left off eating each other when they came in contact with the more civilized." This is Thoreau's testimony to that particular branch of the humanitarian movement; and it is perhaps the more valuable testimony as coming from a perfectly unprejudiced witness,

* *Vide*, especially pp. 230-235.

one who, as he himself says, could at times "eat a fried rat with good relish."

The last point connected with Thoreau's teaching on which it will be necessary to enter, is the subject of politics. And here one might be tempted to state briefly, and once for all, that Thoreau had nothing to do with politics; and thus follow the example of that writer on natural history, mentioned by De Quincey, who, after heading a chapter with the words "Concerning the Snakes of Iceland," proceeded to remark, "There are *no* snakes in Iceland." But though Thoreau was no politician in the ordinary use of the word, and never voted in his life, yet, in another sense, he took a good deal of interest in American state-affairs, especially during the latter years of his life, and left several pamphlets and lectures of the highest possible merit. In his essay on *Civil Disobedience*, he gives expression to that strong feeling of individualism which caused him to resent the meddling and muddling propensities, as they seemed to him, of American government, as seen in the Mexican war abroad, and slavery at home. "Must the citizen," he asks, "resign his conscience to the legislator?" In one way he felt he could make a vigorous protest, and that was on the occasion when he confronted the Government in the person of its tax-col-

lector. He refused to pay the poll-tax, and was on this account put into prison, the true place, as he says, for a just man, "under a Government that imprisons any unjustly." His own account of his own incarceration, and the night he spent in prison, may be found, told in his best and most incisive style, in this same essay on *Civil Disobedience.* The two main causes of his withdrawal of his allegiance to the state were, as I have already said, the aggressive war waged on Mexico and the maintenance of slavery in Massachusetts; he did not care "to trace the course of his dollar," paid in taxes to the State, "till it buys a man, or a musket to shoot one with." On the subject of slavery he was strongly and profoundly moved. There is reason to believe that his hut at Walden was used as "a station on the great under-ground railway—a refuge for the victims of the slave trade." * No more powerful and eloquent indictment of the iniquities of that unholy traffic was ever published than in his three papers on *Slavery in Massachusetts*, *A Plea for Captain John Brown*, and *The Last Days of John Brown.* Those who have hitherto imagined Thoreau to have been a mere recluse, interesting only as a hermit in an

* *Vide* Preface to Mr. Stevenson's *Familiar Studies of Men and Books.*

age when hermits were somewhat out of date, will be obliged to reconsider their opinion, if they take into consideration these splendid essays, so full of sound common sense, trenchant satire, and noble enthusiasm for humanity.

But it is time now to bid farewell to Thoreau in his character of philosopher and moralist, and to view him awhile in another light. He has been well called by Ellery Channing the "Poet-Naturalist;" for to the ordinary qualifications of the naturalist—patience, watchfulness, and precision—he added in a rare degree the genius and inspiration of the poet. He may be described as standing midway between old Gilbert White of Selborne, the naturalist *par excellence*, and Michelet, the impassioned writer of that wonderful book *L'Oiseau*. He had all that amazing knowledge of the country, its Fauna and Flora, which characterised Gilbert White, his familiarity with every bird, beast, insect, fish, reptile, and plant, being something little less than miraculous to the ordinary unobservant townsman. Very suggestive of Selborne, too, was that pocket-diary of Thoreau's, in which were entered the names of all the native Concord plants, and the date of the day on which each would bloom. "His power of observation," Emerson tells us, "seems to indicate additional senses."

On the other hand, he equalled Michelet—and it is scarcely possible to give him greater praise than this—in that still higher creative power, which can draw from a scientific fact of natural history a poetical thought or image to be applied to the life of man. As Michelet could see in the heron the type of fallen grandeur, the dispossessed monarch still haunting the scenes of his former glory; or in the woodpecker the sturdy solitary workman of the forest, neither gay nor sad in mood, but happy in the performance of his ceaseless task; so Thoreau delighted in idealising and moralising on the facts which he noted in his daily rambles by forest, river, or pond. He sees the pincushion galls on the young white oaks in early summer, the most beautiful object of the woods, though but a disease and excrescence, "beautiful scarlet sins, they may be." "Through our temptations," he adds, "ay, and our falls, our virtues appear." Countless instances of this kind of thought could be picked out from his diaries and the pages of *Walden;* in fact, Thoreau has been blamed, and not altogether without reason, for carrying this moralising tendency to excess—a fault which he perhaps acquired through the influence of the Transcendental movement. In love of birds he certainly yielded no whit to Michelet himself; and he is never weary of recording his en-

counters with the bob-o'-links, cat-birds, whip-poor-wills, chickadees, and numerous other species. His paper on the *Natural History of Massachusetts* gives a short and pithy summary of his experience in this subject; but he had usually a strange dislike of writing detached memoirs, preferring to let the whole subject rest undivided in his mind. His studies as naturalist were too much a part of his whole character to be kept separate from the rest, and must therefore be sought for throughout the whole body of his works. This intense love of woodcraft, together with his taste for all Indian lore, and all hunting adventure, gives a wild and racy charm to Thoreau's books which often reminds one of Defoe and other early writers. On the subject of fishing not even Izaak Walton himself could write as Thoreau has done, though one is somewhat reminded of the father of the "gentle craft" in reading passages such as the following:* "Who knows what admirable virtue of fishes may be below low-water mark, bearing up against a hard destiny? Thou shalt ere long have thy way up all the rivers, if I am not mistaken. Yea, even thy dull watery dream shall be more than realized. Keep a stiff fin then, and stem all the tides thou mayst meet." Still more wonderful are the descriptions of the weird and mysterious

* "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," p. 44.

characteristics of fishing—the cork that goes dancing down the stream when suddenly "emerges this fabulous inhabitant of another element, a thing heard of but not seen, as if it were the creation of an eddy, a true product of the running stream;" or, still more memorable, the midnight fishing on Walden Pond when the angler, anchored in forty feet of water, "communicated with a long flaxen line with mysterious nocturnal fishes" below, now and then feeling a vibration along the line "indicativ of some life prowling about its extremity, som dull uncertain blundering purpose." If Thore could thus sympathise with the mysteries fish-life, we are the better able to believe wh his biographers more than once tell us, th fishes often swam into his hand and would allo him to lift them out of the water, to the u speakable amazement of his companions in t boat. His influence over animals seems inde to have been little less than miraculous, and calls many of the legends of the anchorites the Middle Ages, and of St. Francis d'Assi As Kingsley has pointed out in his *Hermits*, t power of attracting wild animals was doubtl in large measure due to the hermits' habit sitting motionless for hours, and their perf freedom from anger or excitement, so that th is nothing absurd or improbable in such stor as those of the swallows sitting and singing

the knees of St. Guthlac, or the robin building its nest in St. Karilef's hood. Much the same is recorded of Thoreau's habitual patience and immobility. Emerson tells us that "he knew how to sit immovable, a part of the rock he rested on, until the bird, the reptile, the fish, which had retired from him, should come back and resume its habits, nay, moved by curiosity, should come to him and watch him." Of all such stories of strange sympathy between men and the lower animals none are so beautiful as those recorded in the life of St. Francis; but certainly Thoreau may claim the honour of having approached nearest in modern times to that sense of perfect brotherhood and sympathy with all innocent creatures. There is a singular resemblance between the legend of the tench which followed the boat in which St. Francis was praying; and some of the anecdotes told about Thoreau.

Thoreau's retirement to Walden has naturally led many people to consider him as a sort of modern hermit, and the attraction he exercised over the inhabitants of the woods and waters was only one of many points of resemblance. There was the same recognition of the universal brotherhood of men, the same scorn of the selfish luxury and childish amusements of society, and the same impatience of the farce which men call "politics," the same desire of self-concentra-

tion and undisturbed thought. Thoreau also possessed, in a marked degree, that power of suddenly and strongly influencing those who conversed with him, which was so characteristic of the hermits. Young men who visited him were often converted in a moment to the belief "that this was the man they were in search of, the man of men, who could tell them all they should do." * But it would be a grievous wrong to Thoreau to allow this comparison, a just one up to a certain point, to be drawn out beyond its fair limits. He was something more than a solitary. He had higher aims than the anchorites of old. He went to the woods, as he himself has told us, because he wished "to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life." So far he was like the hermits of the east. But it was only a two-years' sojourn, not a life-visit, that he made to Walden; his object was not merely to retire, but to fit himself for a more perfect life. He left the woods "for as good reason as he went there," feeling that he had several more lives to live, and could not spare more time for that one. Even while he lived at Walden he visited his family and friends at Concord every two or three days; indeed, one of his biographers † asserts that he

* Emerson's "Memoir of Thoreau," p. 18.
† Ellery Channing's "Memoir," p. 18.

"bivouacked" at Walden rather than actually lived there, though this is hardly the impression conveyed by Thoreau himself or other authorities. Very different also was Thoreau in his complete freedom from the morbid asceticism and unhealthy habit of body, which too often distinguished the hermits. His frugality was deliberate and rational, based on the belief that the truest health and happiness must be sought in wise and unvarying moderation; but there was no trace of any unreasoning asceticism; his object being to vivify, not mortify, the flesh. His nature was essentially simple and vigorous; he records in his diary * that he thought bathing one of the necessaries of life, and wonders what kind of religion could be that of a certain New England farmer, who told him he had not had a bath for fifteen years. Now we read of St. Antony—and the same is told of most other hermits—that he never washed his body with water, and could not endure even to wet his feet; dirtiness therefore must be considered a *sine qua non* in the character of a true hermit, and this would entirely disqualify Thoreau for being ranked in that class. It is at once pleasanter and more correct, if we must make any comparisons at all, to compare him to the philosopher Epictetus, who lived in the vicinity

* "Summer," pp. 352, 353.

of Rome in a little hut which had not so much as a door, his only attendant being an old servant-maid, and his property consisting of little more than an earthen lamp. Thoreau had the advantage over the Stoic in having no servant-maid at Walden; but as he indulged himself in a door, we may fairly set one luxury against the other, and the two philosophers may be classed on the whole as equally praiseworthy examples of a consistent simplicity and hardihood.

Before proceeding to consider the literary value of Thoreau's writings, I will say a few words more about his character and general mode of life. His bodily vigour is mentioned by all who have written of him,* and all lay stress on his wonderful fitness of body and mind, which remind us of some of Charles Kingsley's best features of character. He ate little flesh, drank no wine, seldom used tea, coffee, butter, milk, and refused to be "upset and overwhelmed in that terrible rapid and whirlpool called a dinner." At Walden he often made a satisfactory meal off a dish of purslane boiled and salted, or the ears of green sweet-corn. He baked his own bread, leavened at first, but afterwards without yeast, according to a recipe of M. P. Cato, published two centur-

* *Vide* Emerson's "Memoir," p. 15.

ies before Christ. Side by side with this sturdy independence, he possessed a wide catholic spirit of humanity and sympathy with the whole human race; he will not be better or worse than his fellow-men. We are reminded of the writings of Walt Whitman himself, the greatest literary figure among all Thoreau's fellow-countrymen, when we hear him saying, "I never dreamed of any enormity greater than I have committed. I never knew, and never shall know, a worse man than myself."* I have already said that Thoreau was full of reverence for all religion and antiquity. He was deeply interested in all that related to the aboriginal Indian tribes, of whom there is much mention in his account of his visits to the Maine Woods; and he often records in his diary the finding of arrow-heads and spear-points. It is curious also to find him speaking favourably of classical learning in the chapter of *Walden* on Reading. Nevertheless he owned his full share of American self-assertion and pugnacity. In writing his *Walden* he proposes "to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning," if only to wake up his neighbours; and he does not omit to chronicle the fact that he took up his abode in the woods on Independence Day. A more provoking habit was his whim of extolling his native Concord as superior to all other locali-

* *Walden*, p. 84.

ties, and of asserting that most of the phenomena observed elsewhere, even in the Arctic circle, might be found there. This, as Emerson has pointed out, was no doubt in great measure meant as a playful exaggeration, by way of indicating that there is plenty to be learnt in *all* places; but it was perhaps also due in some degree to that tendency to paradox in conversation which I have already mentioned. His love of liberty was at all times genuine and profound, and appeared both in his personal resistance to the demands of a corrupt government, and in the ready assistance he lent to the cause of emancipation. Yet he was no empty enthusiast for the mere *name* of liberty, but could well discern the true freedom from the false. The behaviour of his fellow-citizens who could restore an escaped slave to his master, at the very time when they were celebrating their national independence, strikes him as ludicrously incongruous. "Now-a-days," he remarks—in his essay on *Slavery in Massachusetts*,—"men wear a fool's-cap and call it a liberty-cap. I do not know but there are some who, if they were tied to a whipping-post, and could get but one hand free, would use it to ring the bells and fire the cannons, to celebrate *their* liberty." This independence of character was maintained unbroken not only throughout all the active years of his life, but also through

the long sad months of illness that preceded his death. Though suffering terribly from sleeplessness, he refused to take any opiate drug; preferring, like a true Stoic, to face the full reality of his destiny without shrinking. Wrapped in his usual reserve, he worked on unfalteringly to the last, completing in his *Maine Woods* the stories of his favourite Indian tribes, whose traditional characteristic of silent fortitude and passive resignation to fate he himself was then equalling.

The earliest written of Thoreau's books was the *Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, a record of a holiday-trip made in 1839 in company with his brother. The *Week* is prefaced by a short account of the river Concord, which may be compared with Hawthorne's description in *The Old Manse*, and is divided by days into seven chapters, each full of accounts of the scenery through which the brothers passed, notes and observations on natural history, quotations from poets, and general moral reflections. Next to *Walden*, it seems to have become in America the best known of Thoreau's books, and is highly praised by Ellery Channing in his life of Thoreau, though it is but a poor precursor of his great work. Those who look to the *Week* for anything comparable to *Walden* will be disappointed, the incidents recorded being often too trivial, the moralising tendency exces-

sive, and the style of the writing crude and immature. There is something rather wearisome, and even pedantic (a strange fault in Thoreau), in the too numerous classical allusions and references to Homer, Sophocles, Persius, and other ancient writers, while the number of quotations from English poets is something positively overwhelming, and furnishes a notable example of that literary fault which, under the appellation of *fluxe de bouche*, has been so justly censured by De Quincey in the case of Hazlitt. None the less, there are some splendid passages in the book, worthy to be set beside anything that Thoreau ever wrote, especially the discourses on religion and friendship already referred to, and a critical estimate of Chaucer's genius.

Omitting for the present any mention of Thoreau's shorter essays and studies, many of which were written early in his life and published in the "Dial" and other American magazines, afterwards to be reprinted under the title of *Excursions*, I will now speak briefly of *Walden*, which alone of Thoreau's books can be said to be at all popular in this country. It has been truly remarked that Thoreau's retirement to Walden was only one of many incidents in his life, and therefore ought not to be invested with too much significance apart from the rest. It was, however, undeniably the most character-

istic and important epoch in his career; the time when his powers were in their very prime; on the description of which he has lavished the utmost wealth of his rare and wayward genius. *Walden* is by far the finest of Thoreau's books, pre-eminent alike for the supreme interest of the subject-matter and the excellence of style and expression. We here see Thoreau at his very best, revelling in the perfect freedom of a simple and healthy life, and enjoying unlimited opportunities for his favourite pursuits; his philosophical and moral teaching is here most lofty and uncompromising; his style of writing peculiarly pithy and trenchant; nowhere else do we find such felicity of illustration or so rich a vein of humour. Those critics who have accused Thoreau of a lack of humour must surely have forgotten such passages of *Walden* as that where, after describing the profound darkness of the woods on a starless night, he quietly remarks, "I believe that men are generally still a little afraid of the dark, though the witches are all hung, and Christianity and candles have been introduced;" or, again, the inimitable account of his purchase for building purposes of an Irishman's shanty, where there were "good boards all around, and a good window, of two whole squares originally, only the cat had passed out that way lately;" or the picturesque description of the wretched habitation of John Field, another Irish labourer,

where he saw

"a wrinkled, sibyl-like, cone-headed infant, that sat upon its father's knee as in the palaces of nobles, and looked out from its home in the midst of wet and hunger inquisitively upon the stranger, with the privilege of infancy, not knowing but it was the last of a noble line, and the hope and cynosure of the world, instead of John Field's poor starveling brat."

Nothing perhaps in *Walden* is more humorous than the accounts of the visits of uninvited guests, and their entertainment by Thoreau. If one came he was heartily welcome to share the frugal meal; but if many came, nothing was said about dinner, "the waste and decay of physical life" appearing to be "miraculously retarded in such a case." "So easy is it," adds Thoreau, "though many housekeepers doubt it, to establish new and better customs in the place of the old." Sometimes there would arrive more troublesome and pertinacious guests, "men who did not know when their visit had terminated, though I went about my business again, answering them from greater and greater remoteness." There are passages on every page of *Walden* full of this rare and subtle power, and manifesting that "concentrated and nutty" style of writing at which Thoreau confessedly aimed. Nor did he disdain an occasional play on words, seldom used without good effect, as in the case of Flint's Pond, when he deplores the poverty of American nomenclature, which

could desecrate a beautiful sheet of water with the name of some stingy farmer, some ancestral *skin-flint* by whom its banks had been ruthlessly laid bare; or when he records the fact that while he was building his hut at Walden, a heap of bricks often served him for a pillow, adding, "yet I did not get a stiff neck for it that I remember; my stiff neck is of older date." Occasionally, too, he loved, in the same manner as Ruskin, to analyse and dwell on some particular word; for instance, when scornfully rejecting the advice of critics to keep his style within bounds, he insists on the merits of literary extravagance. "I fear chiefly lest my expression be not *extra-vagant* enough, may not wander far enough beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience. *Extra-vagance!* It depends on how you are yarded." *Walden*, like all Thoreau's writings, has its faults. His vein of dry humour is sometimes liable to be misunderstood, and his fondness for epigram and paradox is occasionally overdone; the didactic tendency also is apt to make him too discursive, and most of the poetical quotations might well be dispensed with. But these blemishes are small in comparison with the immense merits of this book—merits which have not yet received one-thousandth part of the recognition they deserve.

Of Thoreau's three other books, *The Maine Woods*, *A Yankee in Canada*, and *Cape Cod*, it

is not necessary to say much. *The Maine Woods* will probably be considered the most interesting, dealing as it does with the wild Indian tribes whom Thoreau loved so much, and the primitive forests, the savage desolation of which he was well fitted to appreciate and describe. There is little that is remarkable in the two other books, which are pleasant accounts of short tours made by Thoreau, and make no pretence of being important works like *Walden.* At the beginning of the *Yankee in Canada* Thoreau tells us that he is aware he has not got much to say about that country; "What I got by going to Canada was a cold." This is a candid confession, and, if truth be told, a critical reader would not be unlikely to find much that is frigid in the *Yankee in Canada*, as if the author's malady had reacted on the book.

Next to *Walden* Thoreau is seen at his best in the short lectures and essays, which have been collected and reprinted under the titles of *Excursions* and *Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers.* In the *Excursions* there is less of the didactic and moralising vein than in most of Thoreau's writings, and more of pure description and word-painting; the most interesting essays being those on *A Winter's Walk*, *Walking*, and *Night and Moonlight.* The importance to Thoreau of his daily walk was greater than most men would be able to realize; he

could not preserve his health and spirits unless he spent at least four hours a day among his favourite woods and fields and marshes; and he did not scruple to reject unwelcome offers of companionship from intrusive visitors, on the ground that there was nothing so important to him as his walk; he had no walks to throw away on company. His tendency in his saunterings was ever towards the west, the region of the wild and mysterious, in preference to the more civilized east; an instinctive feeling which has also been noticed by John Burroughs, an American Essayist in several ways akin to Thoreau. Latterly he discovered a still more novel charm in the nocturnal rambles of which he gives an account in *Night and Moonlight*, during the hours when "instead of the sun there are the moon and stars; instead of the wood-thrush there is the whip-poor-will; instead of butterflies in the meadows, fireflies—winged sparks of fire. Above all the wonderful trump of the bull-frog, ringing from Maine to Georgia." The *Anti-Slavery Papers* are inferior to nothing that Thoreau ever wrote, *Walden* perhaps excepted, being written in his most telling style, terse, pointed, satirical, yet evidently inspired by the sincerest enthusiasm and devotion to a great cause. The best of all is his *Plea for Captain John Brown*, a splendid eulogy of a truly noble man, which was spoken in a public

hall at Concord after John Brown's arrest in 1859, at a time when such a view of the slave question was neither common nor popular. It is so fine throughout that it is difficult to single out any particular passages as specially worthy of praise, but I cannot help quoting the following: *

"Who is it whose safety requires that Captain Brown be hung? If you do not wish it, say so distinctly. While these things are being done, beauty stands veiled, and music is a screeching lie. Think of him; of his rare qualities!—such a man as it takes ages to make, and ages to understand; no mock hero, nor the representative of any party—such as the sun may not rise upon again in this benighted land. To whose making went the costliest material, the finest adamant; sent to be the redeemer of those in captivity; and the only use to which you can put him is to hang him at the end of a rope! You who pretend to care for Christ crucified, consider what you are about to do to him who offered himself to be the saviour of four millions of men."

The other paper on *The Last Days of John Brown* is almost as fine. So too is *Civil Disobedience*, of which I have before spoken. A few miscellaneous essays are included with this collection, a criticism of Carlyle being among the number.

Thoreau's diaries afford much delightful reading, and give us a good insight into his character and mode of life. They abound in notes of his observations on Natural History,

* Page 178.

with here and there some poetical thought or moral reflection attached; sometimes there is an account of a voyage up the Assabet River, or a walking tour to Monadnock or some other neighbouring mountain. These diaries have been recently edited by Mr. Blake, a friend of Thoreau, who has arranged them according to seasons,* not years, various passages written in different years being grouped together under the same day of the month, thus giving a more connected picture of the climate under which Thoreau lived, and the scenes in which he took such delight.

Thoreau's poems are certainly the least successful part of his work. They were published in various American magazines, and he is fond of interpolating parts of them in his books. Some selections from them may be found in Page's *Life of Thoreau.* But it must be confessed that though Thoreau had a truly poetical mind, and though he may justly be styled the "Poet-Naturalist," he had not that power of expression in verse which is a necessary attribute of the true poet. He was a clear-headed, fearless thinker, whose force of native shrewdness and penetration led him to test the value of all that is regarded as indispensable in artificial life, and to reject much of it as unsound; he was gifted also with

* *Early Spring in Massachusetts, Summer,* &c.

an enthusiastic love of nature, and with literary powers, which, if not of a wide and extensive range, were peculiarly appropriate—in an almost unrivalled degree—to the performance of that life-duty which he set before him as his ideal. He was in the truest sense an original writer; his work is absolutely unique. *Walden* alone is sufficient to win him a place among the immortals, for it is incomparable alike in matter and in style, and deserves to be a sacred book in the library of every cultured and thoughtful man; it is, as Thoreau himself describes the pond from which it derives its name, "a gem of the first water which Concord wears in her coronet." Concord is indeed rich in literary associations and reminiscences of great men. Emerson—Hawthorne—Thoreau; these are mighty names, a trinity of illustrious writers, and it is not the least of Thoreau's honours that he has won a place in this literary brotherhood; but perhaps his greatest claim to immortality will be found in the fact that there is a natural affinity and fellowship between his genius and that of Walt Whitman, the great poet-prophet of the large-hearted democracy that is to be. We see in Walt Whitman the very incarnation of all that is free, healthy, natural, sincere. A leviathan among modern writers, he proclaims with titanic and oceanic strength the advent of the golden age of

Liberty and Nature. He proclaims; but he will not pause to teach or rebuke; he leaves it to others to explain by what means this glorious democracy, this "love of comrades," may be realized, and contents himself with a mighty and irresistible expression of the fact. Thoreau, though less catholic and sanguine in tone, but rather an iconoclast, a prophet of warning and remonstrance, and, as such, narrower and intenser in scope, nevertheless shares to the full all Walt Whitman's enthusiasm and hardihood and sincerity. He sets himself to apply this same new doctrine of simplicity to the facts of everyday life, and by his practice and example teaches *how* the individual may realize that freedom of which the poet sings. While America produces such writers as these, there seems nothing exaggerated or improbable in the most sanguine forecast of the great future that awaits American literature, a future to which Thoreau, himself American to the backbone, looked forward with earnest and trustful anticipation.

"If the heavens of America," he says, "appear infinitely higher, and the stars brighter, I trust that these facts are symbolical of the height to which the philosophy, and poetry, and religion of her inhabitants may one day soar. At length, perchance, the immaterial heaven will appear as much higher to the American mind, and the intimations that star it as much brighter." *

* *Excursions*, p. 182.

Certain it is that of all philosophers, whether in the old world or the new, few have read the mysteries of this immaterial heaven and its starry intimations more truthfully and faithfully than Thoreau.

William Godwin.

WILLIAM GODWIN'S life is a remarkable instance of how the longevity of a man of genius may, under certain circumstances, be a positive obstacle to his fame. Had he died at the close of the eighteenth century, instead of living to see thirty-six years of the nineteenth, it seems probable that his reputation with posterity as a thinker and a writer would have stood higher than it stands at present, or is ever likely to stand. For in the acquisition of fame, as of other things, opportunity is often an important consideration; and it cannot be denied that the actors on this stage of life may gain as much advantage from a graceful and timely exit as from an opportune entry. In this matter Godwin was unquestionably unfortunate; his great, striking, and original works were all written before 1800; while his later writings, excellent and conscientious as they were, cannot be said to have added in any way to his permanent repute, except perhaps in the case

of his reply to Malthus' *Essay on Population.* In more than one sense the year 1800 was the turning-point in his previously brilliant career; for it was then that his drama *Antonio* on which he had rashly built his hopes, met with complete failure: while from about this time may be dated the commencement of the money troubles which so greatly embittered his later life. Henceforth he was seen in the character of the needy book-maker rather than the keen literary enthusiast; outliving, as the years went by, not only his early friends and political associates, but, which was still more sad, his own stern philosophical self-respect, and the high hopes and aspirations which had inspired his *Political Justice.* Under these circumstances it is not surprising that the familiarity of so near a view should have bred, in the public estimation of Godwin's genius, a certain measure of contempt, and that the philosopher who was somewhat over-rated in the outset of his career should afterwards have been unduly depreciated. The loss of his wife, the talented and noble-minded Mary Wollstonecraft, in the first year of their married life, was in every way an irreparable blow to Godwin; for the woman who died in the zenith of her intellectual and moral enthusiasm was surely less to be pitied than the man who survived his happiness by nearly forty years.

If we keep in mind this fact, that the Godwin of the closing years of the last century, the author of *Political Justice*, and husband of Mary Wollstonecraft, was a very different person from the impecunious bookseller of twenty or thirty years later, whose correspondence * with his more generous and open-handed son-in-law, Shelley, shows him in a far from favourable light, we shall be less surprised when we note the wide divergence of opinion that seems to have existed, and still to exist, respecting Godwin's character. While some have spoken of him as a philosopher of stern, unflinching disposition, and one of the leading pioneers of modern thought—a view, which, as I hope to show, finds justification in the nobler passages of his life—others have been able to see in him nothing more than a cold-blooded, unemotional sophist, preaching a doctrine which he himself was by no means careful to practise in his actual intercourse with mankind. Nor can it be denied that there is some basis of truth in the unfavourable, as well as in the favourable judgment; though I think that the total and final impression conveyed by a study of Godwin's character in all its phases should be a more pleasant and charitable one. Two leading features are

* *Vide* Prof. Dowden's "Life of Shelley," vol. ii.

easily discernible in his nature, both in the earlier and the later period of his life. One is the strong didactic tendency, which was fostered even in childhood by the Calvinistic atmosphere of his surroundings; the other is the predominance of the purely intellectual element, which he cultivated to a great extent at the expense of the emotional. The description given by Godwin's biographer * of his early piety and the severity of his religious training may make the reader smile at the odd contrast with his later convictions, but it accounts for that serious tone which prevades all Godwin's thoughts and writings. The boy whose earliest books were the *Pilgrim's Progress* and the *Account of the Pious Deaths of Many Godly Children*, ~~and~~ who was seriously reproved for his levity when he happened one Sunday to take the cat in his arms, soon developed the habit of preaching to other lads of his acquaintance, and is said to have dwelt so powerfully on the subject of "sin and damnation" that he drew tears from the eyes of his audience. As he grew older his religious belief was changed, but he always retained somewhat of the preacher's earnestness and gravity, together with that characteristic spirit of mild, yet indomitable pertinacity,

* "Life of William Godwin," by C. Kegan Paul, 1876.

which shows itself so amusingly in the history of his relations with Tom Cooper, the high-spirited pupil who not unnaturally rebelled against the course of rigid discipline and unremitting benevolence to which Godwin subjected him. The habit of minute self-inspection is illustrated by many passages in the diary which Godwin always kept with marked care and regularity; and as he persisted in examining his own mind, so he persisted in probing every intellectual question with the cold clear logic of a calm and unimpassioned reason. To such an extent did he carry this exaltation of the reasoning faculties over the emotional impulses, that he was sometimes led astray by it into ludicrous and extravagant assertions, as when, in his insistence on the absolute power of the will in maintaining complete self-control, he speaks disparagingly of sleep as "one of the most conspicuous infirmities of the human frame." On the whole, however, too much has been made of this deficiency of the sentimental element in Godwin's character: if he was "cold-blooded," it was in the outer appearance far more than the inward reality; and though it was his wont thus to mask himself in a cloud of philosophical imperturbability, there are many indications that the emotion was latent and not absent. In a fragmentary analysis of his own character he speaks of himself as

nervous, timid, and embarrassed in the presence of strangers; while the strength and warmth of his friendships, especially those with young men, for whom he seems always to have had a considerable attraction, and above all, his deep affection for Mary Wellstonecraft, show that he was by no means devoid of the usual human sympathies. Nor was he free from the corresponding sentimental faults; his egotism and vanity making him extraordinarily sensitive to criticism, unless most guardedly expressed, and apt to take offence on slight provocation from even his best friends. In brief, he was a strange mixture of philosophic strength and human weakness; though it must be remembered that these inconsistencies became far more manifest in his latter years than in the prime of his manhood. His conduct during the state-trials in 1794 proved him to be gifted with high courage and sincere conviction; and if it be right, as I believe it to be, to judge a great man by his best work rather than his worst, the period of Godwin's life which demands most consideration from those who wish to understand him is the last decade of the eighteenth century, in which were written his great work, *Political Justice*, and his best novel, *Caleb Williams*. It is in those two books that his philosophical opinions and his literary powers may be most conveniently studied.

Political Justice is one of those books which exercise a permanent influence on the social and political opinion of the country in which they are written, yet fail to win for themselves a permanent and individual fame. Towards the close of the last century the expectation of great and radical changes in the near future had taken powerful hold of men's minds, and the publication of Godwin's book, which gave expression to the vague sentiments and revolutionary aspirations then afloat, carried, as De Quincey has described it, "one single shock into the bosom of English society, fearful but momentary." Yet fifty years later Godwin's philosophic system was practically forgotten; not merely because a good deal of it had been weighed in the balance and found wanting, or even toned down and withdrawn by Godwin himself in subsequent writings; but because most of its best teaching had silently but effectually done its work, being absorbed into the minds of other thinkers and writers, and thus leavening the whole mass of Radical philosophy, In these days of political enfranchisement and liberty of thought, we are in danger of forgetting how deeply the modern Radical school is indebted to its forerunners of a hundred years back, and how much of the speculation of a book such as *Political Justice* has passed unrecognised into the current opinion of to-day, while still more is advanced, in almost

the same words as those used by Godwin, by social reformers who are struggling to bring on a more drastic change.

"It is an old observation," says Godwin, "that the history of mankind is little else than a record of crimes." It seems to have been supposed from this that Godwin was animated by a foolish and unscientific dislike of historical study; such, however, was not the case; for he himself draws an argument from the improvements effected in the past in favour of further improvement in the future, while he distinctly asserts, *not* that society has been wholly useless in defending mankind from want and inconvenience, but that "it effects this purpose in a very imperfect degree." His indictment of the evils of the present social system is powerful and, in the main, unanswerable. Whatever may be thought of the remedies which he proposes to apply, he was not guilty of the absurdity, sometimes attributed to him, of picturing the past and present of man's destiny as a scene of unrelieved blackness and misery, and at the same time holding out a promise of the immediate realization of a golden future. His doctrine of the perfectibility of man does not differ in essential points from the belief held by the elder Mill, that outward circumstances are more powerful than innate principles, and that, therefore, the possibility of improvement

is practically unlimited. He is also careful to state that by perfectibility he does not mean perfection; the latter idea being inconceivable, while the former is merely the recognition of the fact that all improvements which can be conceived can also be realised. In short, so far from placing himself in opposition to the lessons of history and what is now known as evolution, Godwin, who was himself a student and writer of history, finds in these lessons the strongest corroboration of his theories. The knowledge that the present defective society has been evolved from a still more defective state in the past, is a poor argument for supposing that we have now arrived at the *ne plus ultra* of civilisation. It points rather to the certainty of still further and further reform, or in other words, to the perfectibility of mankind.

The instrument by which this perfectibility can be best promoted is, according to Godwin, the spread of intellectual enlightenment. That vice is an error of judgment is his fundamental doctrine, from which it follows that as men become wiser, they will also become more virtuous and just, justice and virtue being regarded as synonymous terms. Godwin does not hesitate to express his opinion that the aim of justice is the general good, apart from every private or personal consideration; and that utility, by which is meant the welfare of the greatest

number, is the true standard of virtue; he even ventures to carry this doctrine to its logical conclusion, and to insist on the suppression of all the domestic affections when they clash with the public interests. To love one's neighbour as oneself is, he tells us, a comprehensive maxim, "possessing considerable merit as a popular principle," but he complains that it "is not modelled with the strictness of philosophical accuracy," since justice prompts us to consider neither one's neighbour nor oneself, but simply what is conducive to the good of the community. This doctrine, however, though highly characteristic of Godwin's logical, matter-of-fact mind, is not an essential part of his philosophy; for he strongly asserts that each individual must determine for himself in what manner he will be acting most in accordance with the demands of justice, since "there is no criterion of duty to any man but in the exercise of his private judgment." This is one of the most important points in all Godwin's teaching, containing, as it does, the assertion of the incompatibility of tyranny and justice. "To a rational being," he says, "there can be but one rule of conduct—justice; and one mode of ascertaining that rule—the exercise of his understanding." The understanding, to be worthy of its name, must be free and unfettered, and must not yield its assent to any proposition which rests merely on a basis of law and author-

ity; since free judgment is the very essence and foundation of all virtuous action; while, on the other hand, tyranny, which commands the assent without convincing the reason, is absolutely fatal to morality. This brings us back to the point from which we started; that the means by which a reformation can be worked out, whether in societies or individuals, must be sought primarily in the spread of enlightened opinion; and in connection with this subject it becomes necessary to consider what are the chief obstacles which stand in the way of such an enlightenment, and why men are prevented from discerning the true principles of morality and justice.

In the first place, Godwin strongly deprecates every form of coercion, except such force as is necessarily employed in self-defence, as for instance in repelling a foreign invader or domestic tyrant with whom argument is useless. Government he considers to be only justifiable "so far as it is requisite for the suppression of force by force." No punishment is allowable except loss of personal liberty, and this should be inflicted solely for the general benefit, as a restraint imposed on the individual offender, and not as a penalty or deterrent. All such institutions as oaths, tests, promises, religious codes, obedience, confidence, and the like, are condemned as interfering with the free exercise of private judgment and thus establishing a fictitious standard

of morality. Even in education Godwin objects to all manner of compulsion, and looks forward to the time when "no creature in human form will be expected to learn anything, unless because he desires it and has some conception of its value." The marriage-laws meet with his most emphatic disapproval, as constituting "a monopoly and the worst of monopolies," and he strongly advocates the abolition of the marriage-bond, so that marriage, "like every other affair in which two persons are concerned, may be regulated by the unforced consent of the parties." The sum of Godwin's teaching on this subject of tyranny amounts to an uncompromising assertion of the rights of Individualism, any curtailment of which must tend to deprave that independence of thought by which alone men can attain to a right sense of political justice. But strongly as he condemns coercion, he reserves his severest censures of all for the institution of property, the subject of which he declares to be the key-stone of his philosophical fabric. Premising that the good things of the world are a common stock, from which each man has the right to draw what he needs, provided that he respects the equal right of his neighbour to these same "means of improvement and pleasure," he points out at great length and with great clearness the many evils of the present system of inequality. Foremost among

these evils are the spirit of subservience which is brought home to every house in the nation by the juxtaposition of poverty and wealth; the spectacle of gross injustice perpetually presented to men's eyes by the ostentation of the rich, which engenders a universal passion for a similar acquisition of luxuries; the loss of that intellectual advancement which might be enjoyed by the great mass of mankind instead of being monopolised by a few; the immense encouragement of vice, owing to "one man's possessing in abundance that of which another man is destitute;" and last, but not least, the tendency of large accumulations of property to promote aggressive and calamitous wars through the thirst for adding kingdom to kingdom. "Hereditary wealth," says Godwin, "is in reality a premium paid to idleness, an immense annuity expended to retain mankind in brutality and ignorance. The poor are kept in ignorance by the want of leisure. The rich are furnished indeed with the means of cultivation and literature, but they are paid for being dissipated and indolent." In the *Enquirer*, written a few years later than *Political Justice*, the same doctrine is reiterated. "It is a gross and ridiculous error to suppose that the rich pay for anything. There is no wealth in the world except this—the labour of man. What is misnamed wealth is merely a power, vested in certain individuals

by the institution of society, to compel others to labour for their benefit." Property is thus considered by Godwin to be a fatal hindrance to a clear-sighted appreciation of justice and therefore to the improvement of the human race. A study of the history of Socialism during the past century will afford proof that while Godwin's name has been to a great extent forgotten, his teaching has certainly not fallen into abeyance.

It is not surprising that the promulgation of such opinions as these, together with many other accessory doctrines equally revolutionary in their tendency, should have caused Godwin to be looked upon as a dangerous innovator. But it ought not to be overlooked that the man who held these advanced views concerning government, marriage, education, property, and other social institutions, was in his own character the very contrary of a lawless or violent agitator, being especially remarkable for his calm, judicial temperament and dispassionate nature. It has been complained that Godwin "with the utmost calmness sweeps away one restraint after another." * But though this is quite true of Godwin as a speculator, it must be pointed out on the other hand that it is equally untrue of him as a social reformer; on the contrary, he is

* Stephen's *English Thought of the Eighteenth Century*, vol. ii.

cautious to a singular degree in the many safeguards with which he hedges round his revolutionary schemes. He regards massacre as "the too possible attendant upon revolution," and massacre "is the most hateful scene, allowing for its momentary duration, that any imagination can suggest." He consequently deprecates the use of any sort of violence, or anything that can tend to produce violence, in his crusade against tyranny and law; his reformation is to be in every sense an intellectual and voluntary one, even political associations being discountenanced by him as likely to promote disorder. "The proper method," he says, "for hastening the decline of error and producing uniformity of judgment, is not by brute force or by regulation, which is one of the classes of force, but on the contrary, by teaching every man to think for himself." He has an unlimited confidence in the ultimate efficacy of the truth, which he believes will be able to produce a spirit of disinterestedness even in the matter of property. On this point he is as distinctly at variance with the communists of the present century as he is in agreement with them on general principles.

As regards individual conduct, Godwin's teaching is a kind of benevolent stoicism. The human will can and ought to be all-powerful, not only in questions of morality, but also in

counteracting the infirmities of nature. Like Bacon he seems to dream of an age when mind shall be supreme over matter; in the meantime he insists that there are intellectual medicines as well as physical, and that when we suffer maladies it is often because we *consent* to suffer them. Side by side with this stoic hardihood he inculcates the duty of a sympathetic benevolence, since "there is no true joy, but in the spectacle and contemplation of happiness." How this moral exhortation, together with the mass of similar precepts which are scattered throughout the pages of *Political Justice*, can be reconciled with the doctrine of Necessity which he deliberately adopts, he fails, like other necessarians, to make clear; in fact, herein consists the weak point of Godwin's treatise, that in aiming at giving it a precise and scientific basis in preference to an emotional one, he defeats his own object and renders himself liable to argumentative attack on the very point where he professes to be invulnerable. He commits the error of attempting to give "mathematical reasons for moral actions"—to quote a phrase used by Shelley, who followed Godwin's philosophy while avoiding his method of imparting it—whereas, if he had been less anxious to give his work the appearance of perfect symmetry and complete logical consistency, and if he had ventured to rely more on that intuitive senti-

ment of humanity, which is after all his strongest weapon, he might have created a still more powerful effect. So clear a thinker and so shrewd a critic as Mr. Leslie Stephen * has succeeded in finding some weak places in Godwin's philosophical system; yet he has failed, I think, to shake that part of the structure which alone is of vital importance, while his whole criticism is harsh in tone and too literal in its application. It is scarcely fair to say that Godwin "placidly ignores all inconvenient facts," or that he "believes as firmly as any Christian in the speedy revolution of a New Jerusalem, four-square and perfect in its plan," when Godwin, grave and dispassionate thinker that he was, expressly provided against any such misunderstanding of his views regarding the future of mankind. "After all," he wrote, "it may not be utterly impossible that the nature of man will always remain for the most part unaltered, and that he will be found incapable of that degree of knowledge and constancy which seems essential to a liberal democracy or a pure equality. . . . A careful enquirer is always detecting his past errors; each year of his life produces a severe comment upon the opinions of the last; he suspects all his judgments and is certain of none." † We may rest assured that

* *English Thought of the Eighteenth Century*, vol. ii., 264—281.

† Book viii., ch. x., second edition.

Godwin was as far from being a crazy enthusiast as he was from being a reckless incendiary, and that though he was so far foredoomed to failure in his attempt to demonstrate scientifically moral and social truths incapable of logical proof or disproof, he was not writing of what he did not understand when he pointed to the present evils of society and to the absolute necessity of discovering a remedy. Opinions must differ as to the value of the remedy he suggests; but none can deny that the social questions to which Godwin drew attention nearly a century ago have become of more and more pressing importance in the years that have since elapsed, and that his manner of discussing them is singularly clear and suggestive. In the very choice of the word Justice as the title for his book, he struck a true note and showed that he had instinctively hit upon the right track; for we have already begun to discover that this question of justice, whether between man and man, or between the state and the individual, is destined to be the great *crux* of modern politics.

Caleb Williams, the novel which Godwin published a year later than his *Political Justice*, is interesting to us for two reasons; first for its intrinsic merits as a work of fiction, and secondly as furnishing a further illustration of the views expressed in its more important predecessor. It is a striking instance of a suc-

cessful novel written by one who cannot be said to have been as a rule a successful novelist. Of the various characters introduced into the book the only two that have any real vitality are those of Caleb Williams himself and his master, Falkland; but these two personages are so vividly drawn, and the position in which they stand towards one another is so graphically and impressively described, that the book possesses for many readers a charm which they can find in none other of Godwin's writings. In his delineation of Falkland, the chivalrous and courtly gentleman, whose life was poisoned by the secret guilt of a terrible crime committed years before under the direst provocation, Godwin was able to strike a blow at the so-called "code of honour" which looked to the chances of the duel for the settlement of personal disputes where calm reason and argument alone could be of any avail. In Caleb Williams, who partly by accident, partly by design, becomes the sharer of Falkland's secret, we see the embodiment of that mild pertinacity and irrepressible love of enquiry which were conspicuous features in Godwin's own character; while the persecution inflicted on the servant who ventures to pry into the affairs of his master serves to illustrate how simplicity and thirst for knowledge, when they run counter to the pleasure of the powerful, are sure to bring

calamity on their possessor. It is small wonder that Godwin wrote well on such a theme as this, for it was a theme after his own heart—this struggle of one individual, whose only fault was a too observant habit and stubborn independence of mind, against all the forces of wealth and authority wielding the pains and penalties of a corrupt and venal law. The involuntary and irresistible attraction by which Caleb Williams is drawn on and on to the fatal discovery which ruins the happiness of his life is a fine feature of the story, and is probably the only indication in Godwin's novels of any imaginative power. As regards expression and style, the narrative, though not free from a somewhat stilted and pompous phraseology, has the merit of being thoroughly lucid and direct, a quality which is observable in all Godwin's writings, whether literary or philosophic.

When we look at Godwin's teaching as a whole, and ask wherein consists his chief merit as a thinker and his claim to be remembered by posterity, we shall probably come to the conclusion that out of the wide field of moral, social, and political topics over which his intellect ranged, three points stand out conspicuous as striking illustrations of his mental sagacity and the foresight with which he in some measure anticipated the Radical opinion of a later time. First, the shrewd instinct by which he laid his

finger on the question of property as the one which, more than any other, is apt to influence and warp the rectitude of private judgment, and which is therefore destined to demand the closest attention of all legislators and philosophers. Secondly, his uncompromising assertion of the freedom of individual opinion and the right of every citizen to shape his life as he chooses, with due respect to the similar rights of others. Communist though he was in principle, Godwin felt strongly that co-operation may have its drawbacks as well as its advantages, and this led him to point out that the system of equality which he advocated must not become in any way a system of repression, under which it might be difficult for each individual to follow the dictates of his own taste and judgment. To enable individuality to gather new strength and vindicate its claim to continued existence, he urges the adoption of frugality and simplicity of living, declaring that the wise course is for men "to reduce their wants to the fewest possible, and as much as possible to simplify the mode of supplying them"—a doctrine still more clearly enforced half a century later in the writings of the Emersonian school. Thirdly, his unswerving belief in the power of truth, and his confident appeal to the higher rather than the lower instincts of mankind, are well worthy of attention in this age of cynical indifferentism

and commercial money-making. He insists that "men are not so entirely governed by self-interest as has frequently been supposed," in which conviction we see an anticipation of some of the best features of the Comtist philosophy. With "Justice" as the watchword of his creed, and the perfectibility of man (in the sense of unlimited intellectual progress) set before him as the object of his hopes, he became the author of a philosophical system, which, though perhaps over-elaborate in its general scope and faulty in some of its details, has certainly the merit of having powerfully influenced the opinions and stimulated the enthusiasm of many to whom the cause of Humanity is dear. It was from Godwin that Shelley drew much of that zeal for truth and freedom, without which his most important poems would never have been written; and it is to Godwin that we in great measure owe our recognition of the fact that both in state policy and individual conduct the only true morality must be looked for in the study of justice. As a prophet and fore-runner of the religion of Humanity, Godwin has a distinct claim on the memory and gratitude of the present age.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's Romances.

"HAWTHORNE rides well his horse of the night." This remark of Emerson's, in allusion to the reticence of one of his guests at a social meeting, is happily descriptive of the literary characteristics by which the author of *The Scarlet Letter* has won himself a peculiar place among the immortals. There is something spectral and elusive about the creations of Hawthorne's genius. The reader of his tales is haunted throughout by a weird, indefinable sense of nocturnal phantasy, which seems to brood over these writings as over no other works of fiction. There have been greater and more powerful masters of the emotions of pity and terror; other novelists have depicted the mysteries and sorrows of human existence in darker and stronger colours, and with a far wider range; but no other writer has ever succeeded in displaying his conceptions through the medium of

that twilight glimmer and filmy half-light, which affects our minds so strangely in reading Hawthorne's romances.

The combination of stern Calvinistic principles with some sort of classical refinement or artistic culture has often been observed to produce a character possessed of certain rich and picturesque qualities. In Hawthorne's case we see an instance of a similar effect. His genius resulted from a mixture of rigid Puritanism with the highest imaginative faculty. His Puritan sympathies—inherited from a line of ancestors who, as he himself loved to record, were famous for their persecution of Quakers and witches—had been fostered still further in boyhood by his intense study of *The Pilgrim's Progress* and other Puritan books. On the other hand, his love of the mysterious and romantic was derived partly from his sensitive organisation and partly from the circumstances of his early life—the lonely days spent in skating on Sebago Lake or shooting in the Maine woods, amid scenes full of traditionary legends and superstitions. His imagination, quickened by these youthful experiences—these "cursed habits of solitude," as he calls them—enabled him to live afresh in the stern old Puritan times, and realise in vision the scenes with which his forefathers had been acquainted. "Every phase of early New England life," writes one of his American

admirers,* every type of early New England character, is familiar to him. The sea, the sky, the air, the storms, the winds, the seasons, the blazing hearth, the deep snows, the dark forest over which superstition had thrown its terrors, thanksgiving day, the election sermon, Thursday lecture, the solemn Sunday—all the memories of New England crowd his pages." Thus equipped, he appeared early in life on the field of literature, choosing as his special and congenial theme the mystery of Sin, in which subject his two natural proclivities, the religious and the imaginative, could meet and harmonise. To estimate the working of the moral law; to note how the germ of evil sown by one man can result in a crop of calamities to others; to track the secret effect of sin on the soul, and to question if it may be, like sorrow, a step in man's education—all this could give an outlet both to Hawthorne's innate Puritan tendencies and his love of imaginative speculation. Among his reminiscences of England, published in *Our Old Home*, there is an account of a certain doctor of divinity, "a perfect model of clerical propriety," who, having just come over from America for a tour in Europe, paid Hawthorne a visit at the Liverpool consulate. A week later he again presented himself, but this time transformed in appear-

* J. W. Symonds' *Oration on Hawthorne*, 1878.

ance "from the most decorous of metropolitan clergymen into the rowdiest and dirtiest of disbanded officers," having fallen into some pitfall "not more of vice than terrible calamity." This tragedy, which Hawthorne says was the deepest he ever witnessed, was nothing more than an illustration from actual life of the topic on which he so often dwelt in his romances.

Hawthorne's literary career was singularly and fortunately deficient in stirring and exciting incidents, the unruffled happiness of his domestic life contrasting strongly with the proverbial troubles of men of genius. Yet there was in him a restlessness of disposition which caused him to make many changes and migrations. In America, as his son tells us in his biography, he was ever shifting his quarters between Concord, Salem, and Lenox; in England he yearned for the climate of Italy; but when he found himself at Rome his affections reverted to England and America. "I should like to sail on and on for ever"—so he said to a fellow-voyager—"and never touch the shore again;" and those who study his life will probably come to the conclusion that this roving tendency, inherited perhaps from his seafaring ancestors, was the main cause of the gloomy depression of his later years, which seems otherwise unaccountable. At any rate, two very distinct periods may be observed, without any fanciful

arrangement, in Hawthorne's career; the former comprising the sixteen years preceding his visit to Europe, and the latter consisting of the last ten years of his life. It will be observed that almost all his most valuable work was done during the first, the American period; once uprooted from his native soil, and sent a wandering tourist through the regular European beat, he could produce nothing comparable to his great early romances. *Twice-told Tales*, *Mosses from an Old Manse*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The House of the Seven Gables*, and *The Blithedale Romance* were all published between 1837 and 1853. Then Hawthorne was made American Consul at Liverpool, and henceforth wrote nothing better than *Transformation*, *Our Old Home*, and the fragmentary stories of which *Septimius* is the chief. It is obvious that for some reason he had partly lost the cunning of his hand in these later years, and the explanation must probably be sought in the prolonged absence from his native soil, the desultory kind of life he led in Europe, and the unintellectual nature of his employment at Liverpool. It is odd to think of the author of *The Blithedale Romance* as an inmate of "Mrs. Blodgett's boarding-house" at Liverpool, where, as Hawthorne's son and biographer apologetically remarks, "the company, though not consisting of the most cultivated persons imaginable, was

very hearty and genuine." Hawthorne seems to have done his best in good-fellowship at Liverpool, as at Brook Farm; but his character was scarcely adapted for boarding in a nautical establishment, where the conversation "savoured of tar and bilge-water," and where sea-captains sat enveloped in a blue cloud of smoke. "It is rather comfortless," he wrote in his *English Notebook*, "to think of home as three years off, and three thousand miles away. With what a sense of utter weariness, not fully realised till then, shall we sink down on our own threshold when we reach it." No doubt these words were written in a mood between jest and earnest, but there was, nevertheless, a prophetic truth in them which was only too literally fulfilled in the sadness of the last few years in his old home at Concord.

Surprise has sometimes been expressed that the Puritan element in Hawthorne's character, together with the matter-of-fact system of American life, were not fatal obstacles to the production of highly imaginative work. In the Preface to *The Blithedale Romance* Hawthorne himself says that he chose the Brook Farm episode as the most romantic of his own life, and as offering a kind of enchanted atmosphere usually unavailable to an American novelist. Again, in the Preface to *Transformation* he remarks that Italy, where the scene of the story

is laid, was "a sort of poetic or fairy precinct where actualities would not be so terribly insisted upon, as they are, and needs must be, in America." "No author," he adds, "without a trial can conceive of the difficulty of writing a romance about a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong." Yet surely this idea is confuted by Hawthorne's own best writings. Nothing could be more truly poetical and imaginative than his admirable treatment of the prim Puritan villages, surrounded by the primeval forests where the witches were thought to assemble on dark nights; the occasional glimpses into Indian character and customs; the unexplored mountains, where "the great carbuncle" might possibly be sighted by some adventurous pilgrim; the calm slow-flowing rivers, with their broad prairies, long meadow-grass, and yellow water-lilies. All these scenes he describes with a measured and meditative delight, which proves that his imagination drew more strength than he himself was aware of from the influence and traditions of his native soil. On the other hand, the Italian novel *Transformation*, is distinctly inferior in all essential qualities to its great American predecessors. Nor need we be surprised at this; for books written in a foreign country, under the impulse of travel and passing observation

rather than life-long intimacy, can seldom attain to the same excellence as those which are inspired by the natural objects which the writer has known from childhood. There never lived a closer observer than George Eliot; yet how slight and artificial is her Italian study, *Romola*, elaborate as it is, compared with her simple, but immortal, delineations of homely English life. So, too, it was with Hawthorne. He set himself with great earnestness and considerable success to study Italian art; yet, with all his pains in founding a romance on this subject, he failed to wield the same power as in his stories of Puritan life.

It can hardly be doubted that *The Scarlet Letter* is the best of all Hawthorne's productions. It is, indeed, one of the greatest of all works of fiction; for in the whole range of English literature there are few things more tragic and more sublime than this simple tale. The resemblance of its general structure to that of Lockhart's *Adam Blair* has more than once been commented on; it is also worth remark that *The Scarlet Letter* offers one or two very striking points of comparison with George Eliot's *Adam Bede*. The relation existing between the two guilty characters are almost identical in the two books; a forbidden love; a fatal secret; a disgrace borne at first by the woman alone, but finally shared by her

lover—these form a strange coincidence in the plans of the novels, which is maintained even in the names of the characters, Hester Prynne and Hester Sorrel, Arthur Dimmesdale and Arthur Donnithorne. But with the names and situation of the characters the similarity ends; for Hawthorne's beautiful and pathetic story is happily free from the sensational incidents which so sadly mar the latter part of *Adam Bede.* In *The Scarlet Letter* the moral is not obtruded on the reader, yet the tone is altogether more lofty and spiritual, and aided by a power of poetical imagination of which George Eliot was wholly destitute. Nor can it be said that Hawthorne, on his side, was deficient in that keen insight and subtle analysis of character for which George Eliot is justly renowned. Indeed, this is one of the most striking features of *The Scarlet Letter*, after the publication of which Hawthorne is said to have been often consulted by various criminals and "spiritual invalids," who thus bore unconscious testimony to the keenness of his observation.

Opinions vary as to the comparative merits of *The House of the Seven Gables* and *The Blithedale Romance.* The former certainly contains passages and scenes which equal anything which Hawthorne ever wrote, foremost among such being the description of the old house, which "affected the beholder like a

human countenance," with its acutely pointed gables and huge clusters of chimneys, but on the whole it is perhaps somewhat lacking in that mysterious glamour which Hawthorne usually contrived to throw over his romances, and it labours under the disadvantage of dealing with several generations of the same family, which renders the plot a little complicated and difficult to keep in mind. The *Blithedale Romance* is free from these blemishes, and it is hard to say which of the four chief characters in this book is most worthy of praise, Zenobia is one of the richest and most gorgeous studies ever produced by novelist or poet, and there is something scarcely less impressive in the delineation of the inexplicable yet persistent curiosity which impels Miles Coverdale to fathom the mystery of her life. Readers of Godwin's novel, *Caleb Williams*, will not fail to notice the singular resemblance between the strange infatuation which led Williams to pry into the terrible secret of his master and benefactor, Falkland, and those passages of *The Blithedale Romance* where Zenobia turns furiously to bay under the scrutiny of her too inquisitive friend. "You know not what you do! It is dangerous, sir, believe me, to tamper thus with earnest human passions, out of your mere idleness and for your sport." In *The Blithedale Romance*, as in *The Scarlet Letter* and *Transformation*,

may be noticed Hawthorne's odd partiality for a quartette of characters; and there is also a certain amount of resemblance between the characters of Zenobia and Priscilla in the one book and Miriam and Hilda in the other.

Hawthorne's position among novelists is wholly unique, for though some of the short tales, by which he first became known as an author, bear a resemblance to those of Poe, his maturer style is absolutely his own. It is worthy of remark that the short prose story has flourished far more on American than on English soil. No first-rate English writers seem to have thought it worth their while to cultivate it to any great extent; and though there are a few masterpieces of this style scattered here and there, as, for instance, in Dicken's books, it cannot be said to have reached any high degree of excellence in this country as it did in the hands of Hawthorne and Poe. Perhaps of all English writers De Quincey is, on the whole, the one who is least dissimilar to Hawthorne, and it is disappointing to learn that two prose-poets never found an opportunity of meeting, though Hawthorne often spoke with warm appreciation of De Quincey. In one point they were closely akin: they both had a keen sense of the impressiveness of a great city. No writer has done justice to the poetry of London life so fully as De Quincey; and it is interest-

ing to find that the London streets, with their countless thousands of unknown faces, exercised the same kind of spell over Hawthorne's imagination as over that of "the English opium-eater." "The bustle of London," he writes, in his English Note-Book, "may weary, but never can satiate me. By night London looks wild and dreamy, and fills me with a kind of pleasant dread." St. Paul's Cathedral, we are not surprised to find, had a special fascination for Hawthorne. "There cannot," he thinks, "be anything else in its way so good in the world as just this effect of St. Paul's, in the very heart and densest tumult of London." He loved to go out and lose himself in the labyrinth of streets, in the same way that De Quincey used to roam at random through the network of crowded passages and alleys. In *Wakefield*, one of the *Twice-told Tales*, we have a fine example of Hawthorne's vivid perception of the mystery of a great city, where the next street may mean practically another world.

Like De Quincey again, Hawthorne was a pure artist, being quite devoid of all those feelings which may be comprised under the name of enthusiasm. He was a quietist in his devotion to literary leisure, a lotus-eater in his enjoyment of calm. His attitude towards idealism, and everything that savoured of transcendental philosophy, if not posititively

hostile, was very far from being friendly, and was certainly in some cases contemptuous and narrow-minded. His inability to sympathise with those whose opinions are in conflict with the conventional laws of society appears unmistakably in many parts of his biography, and is one of the few unpleasant traits in his character. "The sooner the sect is extinct the better, I think," is the concluding sentence in his diary for a day in which he had visited an American Quaker establishment. He spoke of slavery as "one of those evils which Divine Providence does not leave to be remedied by human contrivance." That he should have been a member of the Socialistic circle at Brook Farm has always been, and must continue to be, a matter of wonder and astonishment; and though none can regret an episode which furnished him with such good material for artistic treatment in *The Blithedale Romance*, it is evident that he was by nature incapable of doing justice to the higher aims of that ideal community. Very characteristic, too, is his criticism of Shelley in one of the most humorous stories of the *Mosses from an Old Manse*. Had he been able to understand more clearly the ideals which Shelley had in view, he could hardly have adopted, even in his humorous vein, the theory that the poet of Freethought, if he had lived to mature age, would have been reconciled

to the orthodox faith, or, as he inimitably expresses it, would have written a defence of Christianity on the basis of the thirty-nine articles. It is obvious that when Hawthorne touches on great social questions, he does so merely from the artistic point of view; there is no sign either in his life or writings that he felt anything more than an intellectual interest, or rather indifference, in all such inquiries.

If it were possible for a moment that we could wish Hawthorne's genius to have been other than it was, we might be tempted to regret that he had not a dash of healthy enthusiasm. His admirers have been at great pains to show that there was nothing "morbid" in his character or style of writing; * but unless we are prepared to define the term in a sense altogether different from that in which it is generally understood, I do not think we can justly exonerate Hawthorne from the charge of morbidness. It is undeniable that his favourite study was that of decay rather than growth; sickness rather than health: failure rather than success; in a word, the mortality rather than the vitality of man; and this is not the less true because he has scattered throughout his books, by way of contrast to the prevailing gloom, many delightful pictures of purity and happiness. But it need not be

* *Vide* C. G. P. Lathrop's "Study of Hawthorne," Boston, U. S., 1876.

assumed that in saying Hawthorne's genius was of a somewhat morbid cast, we are in any sense disparaging it. The morbid has its place in literature as well as in nature, and it will be neither possible nor desirable to eliminate it altogether from the domain of art as long as mankind remains in its present condition.

As I have already said, the most peculiar of all Hawthorne's artistic features is the filmy haze of mystery with which he so dexterously contrives to invest his principal characters. This effect is partly gained by his strange habit of suggesting, rather than stating, his fanciful ideas, side by side with the option of some matter-of-fact explanation—a peculiarity which must have arrested the attention of all careful readers of his books; as, for instance, in his description of the mysterious and fatal connection existing between Miriam and the Spectre of the Catacombs; or the unaccountably sudden manner of death hereditary in the Pyncheon family; or the various surmises about the scarlet letter branded on Arthur Dimmesdale's breast; or the numerous references to witches and witchcraft; or lastly, the belief that Dr. Grimshawe's huge spider was the devil in disguise, "a superstition," as Hawthorne drily informs us, "which deserves absolutely no countenance." It has been well remarked that Hawthorne possessed a power of abstracting himself, as it were, from his own

genius, and viewing himself, his family, his circumstances of life, and his writings from an external standpoint, as if he were two persons, the one surveying and commenting on the other. Some of his short stories, notably *Rappacini's Daughter*—which is, perhaps, as fine a specimen of its author's power as anything he ever wrote—are cast in that half-imaginative, half scientific style, of which Poe was also a great exponent, wherein the charm consists in the subtle transition from the real to the fanciful. Given the fact that certain flowers may exercise a strange and deleterious influence on the human senses, and we are led on, step by step, and stage by stage, without any particular revolt of our reason against the improbability of the tale, to the weird conception of a human being whose whole existence is so impregnated with the breath of poisonous flowers that the poison itself has become life, and the antidote death. Here, too, may be noticed that mysterious attraction to the study of flowers in their relation to mankind, which appears in so many of Hawthorne's writings; as in the description of the effect produced on Miles Coverdale by the splendid exotic which Zenobia wore in her hair; the continual recurrence to the subject of the *sanguinea sanguinissima* in *Septimius*; the many touches by which "Alice's Posies" are wrought into the plot of *The House of the Seven Gables*; and the beau-

tiful references in *The Dolliver Romance* to the tropical plant in the old Doctor's garden, which was so connected with memories of his long-lost wife, who had once worn its flowers in her bosom, that it had become "a kind of talisman to bring up her image."

It need not be supposed, however, that Hawthorne's romances are unreal or unnatural, because they are surrounded by this halo of mystery. It is but a thin and transparent veil, which softens and tones down the broad glare of every-day life, yet at the same time leaves the outlines of the characters clear and well-defined. It is, in fact, what Wordsworth has described as

> "The light that never was on sea or land,
> The consecration, and the poet's dream."

For Hawthorne's genius, if we would judge him aright, was something loftier and more inspired than that of a mere prose-writer or novelist—he was rather a prose-poet, a dramatist and lyrist in one. His books were in the highest degree works of imagination, to which was added the most elaborate and careful finish which their author was capable of bestowing on them. None but a real poet could have written that description of Hester Prynne's feelings when she sees her lover pass by "in the procession of majestic and venerable fathers," with-

out sign of recognition, "enveloped, as it were, in the rich music," while at the same time "the heavy footstep of their approaching fate might be heard, nearer, nearer, nearer." Not less poetical is the account of the storm which raged over the House of the Seven Gables after the death of its owner. Many poets have sung of the wind, but few have ever described it better than this. "It is not to be conceived beforehand what wonderful wind-instruments are these old timber mansions, and how haunted with the strangest noises; which immediately begin to sing, and sigh, and sob, and shriek, and to smite with sledge-hammer, airy but ponderous, in some distant chamber, and to tread along the entries, as with stately footsteps, and to rustle up and down the staircase, as with silks miraculously stiff, whenever the gale catches the house with a window open, and gets fairly into it." It is interesting to observe that this rare poetical quality was the one that remained with Hawthorne to the end, even during that sad period of failing power and increasing dejection when he was no longer able to work out more than the disjointed fragments of a romance. There is scarcely in all his writings a more characteristic and imaginative passage than the description in *The Dolliver Romance* of the aged doctor's patch-work gown, of which the original material was "the embroidered front of his own

wedding waistcoat and the silken skirt of his wife's bridal attire," into which the spinsters of succeeding generations had "quilted their duty and affection in the shape of patches upon patches, rose-colour, crimson, blue, violet, and green, and then (as their hopes faded, and their life kept growing shadier, and their attire took a sombre hue) sober grey, and great fragments of funereal black; until the doctor could revive the memory of most things that had befallen him by looking at his patch-work gown as it hung upon a chair."

It would be easy to multiply instances drawn from Hawthorne's works of this gift of brilliant imagination; but enough has now been said. His rare and subtle intellect, high creative powers, and singularly pure and lucid style of expression alike qualify him to rank among the great masters of English fiction.

Some Thoughts on De Quincey.

De Quincey is of those writers who win the approbation of the literary critic by the brilliancy of their style, but at the same time incur the censures of the moralist by their shortcomings in matters of conduct and teaching. Intellectual Hedonism, or lotus-eating, is the crime which has been generally laid to his charge, and to which he has himself in some measure pleaded guilty; his indulgence in opium and his failure to complete any work of magnitude being regarded as the direct result of that "vein of effeminacy" by which, according to one of his critics, "his mind was traversed." His philosophy has been described by Gilfillan* as nothing better than "a sublime gossip"; while, in spite of the somewhat qualified blessing bestowed on him by the *Quarterly Review*†, earnest politicians, even on the Tory side, have usually looked with distrust on the transcendental Toryism of

* "Gallery of Literary Portraits."

† July 1861.

which he was an exponent. It cannot be denied that there was a certain instability in De Quincey's character which partly justifies the adverse judgment so often passed on him; great as his powers were, he seems to have been incapable of turning them to any immediate practical purpose; he was diffident, dilatory, unbusinesslike. In him, if ever in mortal man,

> "The native hue of resolution
> Was sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought;"

and, as a consequence of this, he was utterly deficient in practical enterprise and moral enthusiasm. "At my time of life," he says (six-and-thirty years of age), "it cannot be supposed that I have much energy to spare; and therefore let no man expect to frighten me, by a few hard words, into embarking any part of it upon desperate adventures of morality." But though the weakness of De Quincey in moral fibre is thus unhappily placed beyond dispute, there is nevertheless something rather ridiculous in the solemn and admonitory tone which many of his critics have thought it advisable to adopt in reference to his use of opium and his outspoken confession of that habit. A nation which for commercial purposes forces the import of opium on other countries, in spite of the protest of their native rulers, ought not to be squeamish on the subject of opium-eating, as discussed by

one who has practised it; and the position of De Quincey on this point is that of a literary Publican among Pharisaic critics. Nor is it at all clear that his censors are right in supposing that his intellectual productions were injuriously affected by his opium-eating. It is true that in his autobiographical writings he drew a terrible picture of "the pains of opium," and that in one passage he attributes to opium the failure of his desire to construct a great philosophical work which was to have been entitled *De Emendatione Humani Intellectus;*" but on the other hand we may well doubt if De Quincey's genius was really suited to a labour of this kind, or if the work, supposing it had ever been accomplished, would have been half as valuable as the *Confessions of an Opium-eater*, and the *Suspiria de Profundis*. For, after all, it is surely a mere quibble and play upon words to say that De Quincey left no "great work," as if great works were measured only by the number of their pages or the consistency of their philosophic teaching! That is a very true and important distinction, which De Quincey himself pointed out,* between the "literature of knowledge," whose function is merely to *teach*, and the "literature of power" which is able to *move*. It is to the latter class that De Quincey's prose-

* Collected Works, viii. 3-11.

poems belong, and though their mere bulk is not great, they may justly claim to be one of the supreme achievements of nineteenth-century literature, We can hardly doubt that De Quincey was partly thinking of his own case when, in his article on Professor Wilson, he defended his friend from this same charge of desultory writing. He admits that by increased energy and steadier application he might have produced an enormous and systematic book, but then he remembers the Greek proverb—"Big book, big nuisance," and concludes that the Professor did wisely in leaving his works in short and detached papers, instead of "conglutinating them into one vast block." Let us therefore not grieve overmuch at the loss of the *De Emendatione Humani Intellectus*, for we may rest assured that in his "impassioned prose" De Quincey has left us the best work of which he was capable; and if it was through opium-eating that he expressed his thoughts in this form instead of in a philosophical treatise, it must be admitted that literature owes something to opium. But most great writers have a habit of thus meditating and musing on some phantom work, beside and beyond their actual achievements; witness the *Eureka* of Edgar Poë, and the *Complete Theory of Mind* with which Shelley hoped some day to enrich the philosophical world,—and the cautious critic

will be on his guard against attributing too much importance to any such unrealized intentions.

De Quincey's admirers have been at some pains to refute the fallacious yet rather prevalent notion that he was *only* a sublime dreamer and prose-poet; and certainly the wide scope of his genius is almost the first point that arrests the attention of a careful reader. From earliest youth he had read books of all sorts, with extraordinary avidity, and, as he himself tells us, could never enter a great library without "pain and disturbance of mind," when he sorrowfully calculated that even a long life would only suffice for a perusal of a very small portion of existing literature. Aided by a marvellous memory, he thus accumulated a vast store of knowledge on a great variety of subjects, and being also possessed of a keen critical instinct, he was enabled to use his encyclopædic treasures of information with great judgment and effect. Whether recording personal studies and anecdotes; or giving his opinion on some weighty question of theology or political economy; or throwing light on some point of classical learning, which had baffled the grammarians themselves; or expounding the mysteries of casuistry, secret societies, and the "dark sciences" of the Middle Ages; or holding forth on the elegancies of rhetoric and style; or introducing English readers to German

literature ;—in any and all of these subjects he was equally at his ease. Had he lived six centuries earlier, he would have been a mighty sage and alchemist; living in the nineteenth century, he was the magazine-writer *par excellence*, and found a ready medium for his oracular utterances in the columns of *Blackwood*, *Tait*, and the *Old London* magazine. In none of his essays, perhaps, is his multifarious learning so apparent as in the *Letters to a Young Man whose education has been neglected.* How any such belated youth could be expected to follow De Quincey in the various branches and avenues of knowledge to which his attention is invited, must remain a matter of conjecture; Lord Macaulay's schoolboy himself would have been scarcely equal to De Quincey's requirements; and it might even be conjectured that the "Young Man" in question *was* Lord Macaulay's schoolboy, whose education, according to De Quincey's severe standard, needed complete readjustment and revision.

The juxtaposition in De Quincey's genius of imaginative and critical powers is a very noticeable and important characteristic; in all his chief writings we see, as his biographer* has clearly pointed out, "the logical or quantitative faculty, working alongside the dreaming, or purely abstractive faculty, without sense of

* "Life of De Quincey," by H. A. Page. 1877.

discord." The grave and stately *Suspiria de Profundis* are thus relieved by occasional flashes of humour and intellectual subtlety; while the critical essays, on their part, are full of passages of high poetical power. Yet it must be admitted that De Quincey's chief and final claim to literary immortality must be based less on this analytic faculty, in which he has been equalled or excelled by many other writers, than on that peculiar phantasy, that meditative and imaginative spirit in which he has few rivals. His various writings are valuable chiefly in proportion to the presence of this spirit; the vast range of learning and the discriminating judgment, indispensable though they were even in the elaboration of the prose-poems, are of secondary and subsidiary importance, and his contributions to literature in this department might have been supplied equally well from other sources; but as a dreamer and prose-poet he occupies a position from which he is not likely to be deposed.

The key to a correct appreciation of De Quincey's philosophical opinions is by no means difficult to discover. The venerable and the picturesque—these were the two qualities that profoundly influenced the emotional element in his nature, and enlisted his services as a general rule in the orthodox and constitutional cause. He tells us that his mind,

like that of Sir Thomas Browne, "almost demanded mysteries," and that his faith was that "though a great man may, by a rare possibility, be an infidel, an intellect of the highest order must build upon Christianity." He heartily joined in the royalist sentiment that the Puritan creed "was not a religion for a gentleman," since all sectarianism "must appear spurious and mean in the eye of him who has been bred up in the grand classic forms of the Church of England or the Church of Rome." His politics, for the same reason, were those rather of a mystic than of one personally interested in the questions at stake; and though his regard for rank and his veneration for solemn ceremonies and traditional form made him nominally a Tory, there are many indications in his writings that he had a keen eye for any picturesque elements even in the Radicalism which he denounced. He warmly defended the characters of Milton and Cromwell from the aspersions cast on them by Royalist writers, and argued, in his essay on the *Falsification of English History*, that in the seventeenth century democratic or popular politics were identical with patriotism, though he would not make the same admission concerning the events of his own age. But, however contemptuously earnest-minded reformers may look on such half-hearted princi-

ples as these, none can deny De Quincey the merit of possessing one solid quality, which must be held to outweigh many political sins. Little liking as he had for the programme of modern democracy, his personal sympathies were at all times warm and sincere, for, owing to his own intimacy with poverty and suffering, he was quite free from the least taint of Pharisaism or class prejudice. "*Homo sum; humani nihil a me alienum puto*,"—this was his creed in all personal intercourse, whatever transcendental Toryism he might preach in his politics. "Plain human nature," he says, "in its humblest and most homely apparel, was enough for me;" and there are few nobler passages in his *Confessions* than those which show him in this humane aspect, whether comforting the friendless child in the deserted house in Greek Street, or pacing Oxford Street in company with the outcast Ann, or haunting the London markets on a Saturday night and advising some poor family as to the best mode of laying out their scanty wages. How keenly he sympathised with the sufferings of the poor may be seen from a remark recorded by one who knew him in his later life.* "All that I have ever had enjoyment of in life, the charms of friendship

* "Personal Recollections of De Quincey," by J. R. Findlay. 1886.

the smiles of women, and the joys of wine, seem to rise up to reproach me for my happiness when I see such misery, and think there is so much of it in the world." In one passage of his works he speaks of the brutal spirit of the world which can look "lightly and indulgently on the afflicting spectacle of female prostitution as it exists in London and in all great cities;" in another he rejoices at the interference of Parliament to amend the "ruinous social evil" of female labour in mines. Corporal punishment was another barbarism, utterly distasteful to his humane and gentle disposition; he insists, as a great principle of social life, that "all corporal punishments whatsoever, and upon whomsoever inflicted, are hateful, and an indignity to our common nature," and adds that among the many cases of reforms destined to failure, "this one, at least, never can be defeated, injured, or eclipsed." This noble pity for suffering humanity was one of the most striking features of De Quincey's character, and ought not to be lightly passed over by those who would gain a clear impression of him. It will be found that he was not altogether the mere Hedonist that the reader is tempted at first sight to believe him.

In his literary criticism, as in his political opinions, De Quincey was a worshipper of the grand and the sublime. He regarded Jeremy Taylor and Sir Thomas Browne as the richest

and loftiest of English prose authors; while in poetry he paid especial homage to the sovereignty of Shakspere's power, the sublimity of Milton's conceptions, and Wordsworth's meditative beauty. His dislike of the eighteenth century school was so strong as to make him unjust in some of his criticisms, notably those on Pope and Samuel Johnson; and though he is always interesting and acute in his literary judgments, and sometimes, as in his essay on Shelley, shows an instinctive insight and sympathy which was scarcely to be expected where there was such diversity of character between the critic and his subject, he was as a rule too wayward to be a very trustworthy authority. His love of paradox often led him into difficult or untenable positions; as when he pronounced the sect of the Essenes to be identical with that of the early Christians; or in his still more famous contention that Judas Iscariot was no traitor, but a single-hearted and over-eager enthusiast who sought to precipitate his Master into action under the belief that he was aiming at an earthly and political kingdom; or, once again, in his defence of the principle of duelling as one of the glories of modern times, the absence of which in antiquity was a "foul blot" on the moral grandeur of the Greeks and Romans. Owing to his length of life De Quincey was able, when publishing the collected

edition of his writings, to take a retrospect of his various criticisms, and in some cases, as in that of Dr. Parr, he had the satisfaction of pointing to the fulfilment of a literary prophecy. But there were some points, especially his depreciation of Goethe, in which he must have felt that his early judgment was very far from being confirmed by the general verdict of time and public opinion.

A belief has sometimes been expressed that De Quincey was capable of writing a great historical work, as, for instance, on the fall of the Roman Empire. "Especially was he qualified," says Gilfillan,* "by his superb classical learning, by the taste and tendency of his mind, by the graver graces of his diction, by his intimacy with the spirit and philosophy of Roman story, and by his belief in the Christian faith, for the proud task of writing the history of the Fourth Monarchy. Gibbon has not nearly exhausted the magnificent theme." It is worth noting, in connection with this opinion, that De Quincey himself referred to this epoch as the greatest of historical subjects; "On its own separate account," he wrote in his essay on *The Cæsars*, "the decline of this throne-shattering power must and will engage the foremost place among all historical reviews." But there are many reasons which make it difficult to believe that

* "Gallery of Literary Portraits."

De Quincey was the right person for such a task. In the first place he had not the patience and accuracy of research which are indispensable to the historian; colossal as his memory was, his characteristic disdain of books of reference must inevitably have led him astray. Then, again, he has no real belief in the substantial truth of history, which, as he says, "being built partly, and some of it altogether, upon anecdotage, must be a tissue of falsehoods," since all dealers in anecdotes are tainted with exaggeration. It would certainly have been vain to expect strict historical impartiality in a writer of De Quincey's emotional temperament, as may be inferred from his outspoken remarks on the rights and wrongs of Richard Bentley's long struggle with Trinity College, where after stating his own opinion that Bentley was in the right and the College in the wrong, he proceeds as follows:*—"But, even if not, I would propose that at this time of day Bentley should be pronounced right, and his enemies utterly in the wrong. Whilst living, indeed, or whilst surviving in the persons of his friends and relations, the meanest of little rascals has a right to rigorous justice. But when he and his are bundled off to Hades, it is far better, and more considerate to the feelings of us public, that a little dog should be sacrificed than a great one; for by

* "Essay on Richard Bentley."

this means the current of one's sympathy with an illustrious man is cleared of ugly obstructions." This is no doubt partly humorous, yet it is really illustrative of the spirit of much of De Quincey's work, and it suggests alarming reflections as to what would have been the fate of the "little dogs" of the Roman Empire, under a historian whose conscience was so elastic and accommodating. He himself has divided history into three classes, the narrative, the philosophic, and the scenical—to the last-mentioned of which his own historical sketches undoubtedly belong. "Histories of this class," he says, "proceed upon principles of selection, presupposing in the reader a general knowledge of the great cardinal incidents, and bringing forward into especial notice those only which are susceptible of being treated with distinguished effect." On this principle De Quincey seized on the picturesque characters and striking scenes of the period of which he treated, and it is this that lends so great a charm to his historical essays on *The Cæsars*, *Charlemagne*, *Joan of Arc*, *The Revolt of the Tartars*, and other subjects. There is little doubt that in confining himself to this sort of "scenical history" he gauged his own powers accurately.

In his views of nature De Quincey was a mystic, like Hawthorne, rather than a close observer. He had wandered much in his early

days about the coach-roads and by-paths of England and Wales, but his knowledge of foreign lands was derived solely from books of travel, of which he was a great reader. In this way his mind had become familiar with "those sublime natural phenomena" to which there are so many references in his books—the sandy deserts of Africa; the solitary steppes of Asia; the silence of Lapland; the Canadian forests; the gorgeous sunsets of the West Indies; and other similar scenes. It has been remarked* that he is fond of using similitudes drawn from characteristics of animal life; and in his account of the exhibitions in the Roman amphitheatre he enumerates with much zest the strange animals, "specious miracles of nature brought together from arctic and from tropic deserts," then first presented to the gaze of the Roman populace. But this knowledge was certainly derived almost exclusively from book-lore; indeed, he candidly admits in one of the footnotes which he frequently appended to his writings that "grosser ignorance than his own in most sections of natural history is not easily imagined," though he claims to be possessed of various odd fragments of this kind of knowledge, gleaned here and there in his solitary

* *Cf.* Chapter on De Quincey in Professor Minto's *Manual of Prose Literature.*

rambles. In the *Appendix* to his *Confessions* he wrote a beautiful and pathetic account of the death of a little bird, which had been given to one of his children by a neighbour, but he was compelled to confess that he could not "ornithologically describe or classify the bird," beyond the suggestion that it belonged to the family of finches, "either a goldfinch, bullfinch, or at least something ending in *inch*." In fact, Dr. Johnson's famous remark about Goldsmith's zoological knowledge might be equally well applied to De Quincey, though it must be remembered to the credit of the latter that he did not attempt to write a *History of Animated Nature*. His treatment of nature, as of history, was "scenical"; he seized with rapid intuition on such majestic or picturesque features as struck his fancy in his reading or observation, and reproduced them with wonderful effect in the gorgeous imagery of his prose poems.

But whatever doubts we may reasonably feel concerning De Quincey's capabilities as critic, historian, and naturalist, there can be no question of his supremacy in one branch of psychology which he made peculiarly his own —the study of dreams and certain solemn and mysterious phenomena of the human mind. The inclination to reverie, strongly ingrained in his nature, was quickened and fostered by

various circumstances and incidents of his boyhood, of which he has given us an account in his autobiographical sketches, love, grief, and solitude being foremost among these influences; while the habit of opium-eating, acquired in early manhood, gave an additional stimulus to the meditative and dreaming faculty. No writer has ever analysed and reproduced these mental phenomena so marvellously as De Quincey has done in his *Suspiria de Profundis*, and many passages of his *Confessions*, *Autobiography*, and other works. His eye is extraordinarily keen to mark those sublime aspects and phases of external nature which exercise a potent though inexplicable influence on the thoughtful mind—the deep unbroken quietude of the early summer morning; the solemn thoughts of death aroused by the pomp of the summer noon, or the hours immediately succeeding to sunset; the sense of pathos excited by the appearance of the earliest spring flowers, or by the occasional brief resurrection of summer in the closing autumn days. "It is all but inconceivable," he says, "to men of unyielding and callous sensibilities, how profoundly others find their reveries modified and overruled by the external character of the immediate scene around them." His ear, too, was almost preternaturally sensitive to the influences of sound; whether in listening to the

"pealing anthems" of some mountain stream, or to the music of Beethoven, or to the thrilling voice of Grassini, or to the melody of the Italian language talked by Italian women in the gallery of the Opera House. "Impassioned dancing, sustained by impassioned music," so he tells us in his *Autobiography*, was the most interesting and affecting scene which the world could offer him, "exciting and sustaining the very grandest emotions of philosophic melancholy to which the human spirit is open." Again, what writer has noted with such profound insight those grand and pathetic features of modern life, which escape the remark of less imaginative observers, such as the sense of mystery and immensity inspired by a great city, and the magnetic attraction it exercises on the surrounding country; or the "glory of motion," revealed to De Quincey in the fiery speed, picturesque surroundings, and perfect organization of the English mail-coaches? Nor is this peculiar faculty of De Quincey's genius manifested only in the elaborate dream-fugues and opium-visions by which his name is best known; but also in his record of many passing incidents amidst the wanderings and reveries of his early life, where themes otherwise trivial and commonplace are glorified and exalted by the power of this poetic gift. To take one instance out of many, there is the account given

in the *Confessions* of De Quincey's departure from Wales, when he deemed it necessary to commence a London life—an important occasion, no doubt, in the career of a young man, but by no means a rare or unusual experience. Yet on this seemingly slight foundation how wonderful a structure is reared of "tumultuous vision" and dim presentiment! There is nothing in all his writings more impressive than the description of that calm, pensive, ghost-like November day, on which he set out on his journey with thoughts divided between the pastoral solitudes of Wales and the fierce tumults of London; or the night of storm that followed, as, filled with "heart-shaking reflections," he waited at the Shrewsbury inn for the mail-coach that was to carry him from this point to his destination. It is this power of suggesting mysterious analogies between the realms of sense and the realms of spirit that constitutes De Quincey one of the supreme mystics of literature; it is this that makes his best writings unique and imperishable, in spite of his desultory methods of workmanship and lack of philosophic steadfastness. "Of this," he says, "let every one be assured—that he owes to the impassioned books which he has read many a thousand more of emotions than he can consciously trace back to them. Dim by their origination, these emotions yet arise

in him, and mould him through life like forgotten incidents of his childhood." A similar importance is claimed by De Quincey for the phenomena of dreams, as, being the "one great tube through which man communicates with the shadowy," on which account the dreaming faculty was to him a possession of the utmost dignity and consequence. He considered even Richter too elaborate and too artificial "to realize the grandeur of the shadow" in his dream-studies; and he complains of Swedenborg as "rending the veil" from the spiritual world, and carrying an earthy atmosphere "into regions which, by early connections with the sanctities of death, have a hold upon the reverential affections such as they seldom lose." There is a sublime pathos and intellectual grandeur in De Quincey's visions which is not to be found in the fantastic conceptions of Coleridge or any other member of the opium-eating brotherhood of dreamers.

Well adapted for powerful expression of this meditative psychology was De Quincey's literary style. According to his own definition of rhetoric as "the art of aggrandizing and bringing out into strong relief, by means of various and striking thoughts, some aspect of truth which of itself is supported by no spontaneous feelings, and therefore rests upon artificial aids," he must himself be classed as

a rhetorician, the follower of Jeremy Taylor and Sir Thomas Browne, to whom he awards the *spolia opima* of English prose literature. Among the artificial aids of which he not unfrequently availed himself, the foremost were that "elaborate stateliness," the use of which, provided that the occasion be seasonable, he expressly approves in his essay on *Rhetoric;* and that ornate and effective "word-painting" which is a well-known feature of his writings. Though he was not in the strict sense a poet,—having even in his youthful days discovered that, possible as it would be for him to win a place among the *soi-disant* poets of the day, poetry was not his natural vocation,—he none the less devoted all a poet's care to the structure of his sentences, and the arrangement of his words, and felt all a poet's jealous regard for the sanctity of his mother-tongue. "If there is one thing in this world," he says, "which, next after the flag of his country and spotless honour, should be holy in the eyes of a young poet, it is the *language* of his country." It has been recorded of De Quincey * that he had a strange habit of smoothing and cleaning the greasy Scotch paper-money which offended his fastidious taste, and of polishing and brightening silver before he parted with it—a practice which may be regarded as typical of

* *Cf.* Page's "Life of De Quincey," ii. 145.

the indefatigable care lavished on his writings before he gave them currency. In his essay on *Style* he speaks with unusual severity of the carelessness and lazy indifference shown by most writers in the moulding of their sentences, adding, with obvious reference to himself, that he had known an author "so laudably fastidious in this subtle art as to have recast one chapter of a series no less than seventeen times; so difficult was the ideal or model of excellence which he kept before his mind." Some readers, perhaps, will think that De Quincey employed the ornament derived from the inversion of words till it became almost an affectation: especially in such phrases as that in which he describes opium as "an engine so awful of consolation and support;" or, "simply as an anodyne it was, under the mere coercion of pain the severest;" a form of sentence of which countless examples might be gathered from his writings. Nor is his own grammatical accuracy, strict as he was in theory, at all times unimpeachable; his weakness consisting, as Professor Minto has pointed out, in a careless and ambiguous use of the participle, almost inexplicable in a writer of De Quincey's calibre. An instance may be seen in the following sentence, from which the subordinate parts are omitted. "I remember even yet that when first arrayed, at four years old, in

nankeen trousers, all my female friends filled my pockets with half-crowns,"—a remark which, while testifying to the generosity of the ladies in question, seems to leave their age and costume open to grave misconstruction. But a more serious fault in De Quincey's literary style, inasmuch as it was not, like that I have just mentioned, an occasional peccadillo, but a natural and ineradicable blemish, was his frequent discursiveness, springing no doubt from the immense stores of anecdote and general knowledge with which his mind was filled, and of which he was too often tempted to disburden himself. His so-called *Autobiography*, for example, does indeed contain a good deal of information about himself, but there is also a vast amount of gossip on a variety of other subjects, one whole chapter being devoted to a description of an eccentric young woman whom De Quincey styles "the Female Infidel," and two others to a history of the Irish Rebellion of 1798. It might have been better for De Quincey if, like Demosthenes, he had had a Phocion to "prune his periods." "The body has an awfu' sight o' words," was the remark of a Scotch cook who had been accustomed to receive her orders direct from De Quincey; and if he used circumlocution in the process of ordering dinner, he indulged in far wider flights in his literary and

biographical essays. It is somewhat amusing to find him, in his article on *Style*, insisting strongly on the "vast importance of compression," and the "culture of an unwordy diction."

I have already remarked on the co-existence in De Quincey's mind of the imaginative and logical faculties, once thought to be antagonistic and incompatible. A similar conjunction of opposite qualities is observable in his literary style, where a vein of broad humour, expressed in familiar and colloquial language, runs side by side with the gravity of his most solemn imagery, recalling the reader now and again from the phantasies of the dreamer to the actualities of every-day life, much in the same way as the "knocking at the gate" in *Macbeth*, according to De Quincey's own analysis, serves to re-establish, in the minds of the audience, the existence of the world in which they live, after a parenthesis of the world of darkness. There is, and will probably always be, considerable difference of opinion concerning the quality of De Quincey's peculiar and characteristic humour, some of his critics being inclined to value it very highly, while others will allow him credit for nothing better than a "sarcastic pungency" of a distinctly second rate order.* In this respect he certainly appears in quite a different character from that which is usually ascribed to the opium-

**Cf. Westminster Review*, April, 1854.

eating visionary; for his humour, if such it is to be called, so far from being pensive or subdued in tone, is keen, bold, and at times almost irrepressible, harping persistently on the subject of merriment, and recurring to it again and again with manifest enjoyment. This humorous spirit is seen at its best and brightest in the essays on *Murder considered as one of the Fine Arts*, *Coleridge and Opium-eating*, *Sortilege and Astrology*, or the tale of *The Spanish Military Nun;* but it will be found scattered here and there throughout all De Quincey's writings, and it must be admitted that it occasionally degenerates into something very like mere boisterous slang and badinage, offending the taste of the reader, whose mind has perhaps been just attuned to the stately rhythm of some highly-wrought passage, by the bathos of the sudden descent from the celestial to the commonplace. But such cases are the exception; for as a rule De Quincey's humour is not only delightful in itself, but does good service by acting as a foil to his higher qualities.

In one of his many footnotes De Quincey has given an excellent definition of genius as distinguished from talent. "Talent," he asserts, "is intellectual power of every kind, which acts and manifests itself by and through the will and the active forces. Genius, as the verbal origin implies, is that much rarer species of intellectual

power which is derived from the *genial* nature —from the spirit of suffering and enjoyment, from the spirit of pleasure and pain, as organised more or less perfectly; and this is independent of will. It is a function of the *passive* nature." Judged by this distinction—and it would be difficult to find a sounder one—De Quincey must always be classed with men of genius rather than with men of talent, for the spontaneity of his writings is fully as apparent as their power. Though he was largely indebted to the accession of learning and literary taste, and to the external embellishments of his brilliant rhetorical fancy, yet his success was primarily due to his imaginative subtlety, to the inspiration that is inborn, rather than to the culture that can be acquired. Thus it was that though his life was cast in an age of mighty intellects, with some of whom he was himself closely associated, he preserved to the end his own individuality and independence, setting the stamp of his peculiar genius clearly and unmistakably upon every page of his works. The only writer of this century, or indeed of any century, to whom he bears much affinity, is Coleridge; and even here the similarity, though very striking as regards the general disposition and mode of life, does not extend to the manner of thought and expression. A reader of De Quincey's biographical essay on Coleridge* must be

*Vol. ii. "Lake Poets."

struck by the fact that much of what he says of Coleridge's dreamy nature and dilatory habits would apply equally well to himself; and in both cases the use of opium brought an aggravation of the evil. The same resemblance may be traced in the prodigious memory, great conversational powers, and general literary scope of the two authors. De Quincey has himself remarked that he "read for thirty years in the same track as Coleridge—that track in which few of any age will ever follow us, such as German metaphysicians, Latin schoolmen, thaumaturgic Platonists, religious mystics." Finally, the same reproach has been commonly urged against both, of having wasted their fine powers in trivial and desultory occupations, and of having left no great monumental work. It has been my endeavour to show that this assertion, as regards De Quincey at any rate, is only true in the very limited sense that he instinctively preferred to throw his writings into the form of short papers, rather than bulky volumes. Those who condemn him on this account should remember Addison's satire on the tendency to estimate the value of books by their quantity rather than their quality. "I have observed,"* he says, "that the author of a *folio*, in all companies and conversations, sets himself above the author of a *quarto;* the author of a *quarto* above

* *Spectator*, No. 529.

the author of an *octavo*, and so on, by a gradual descent and subordination to an author in *twenty-fours*. In a word, authors are usually ranged in company after the same manner as their works are upon a shelf." It is only by the adoption of some such criterion as this, that De Quincey's masterpieces can be ruled out of the category of great works.

THE END

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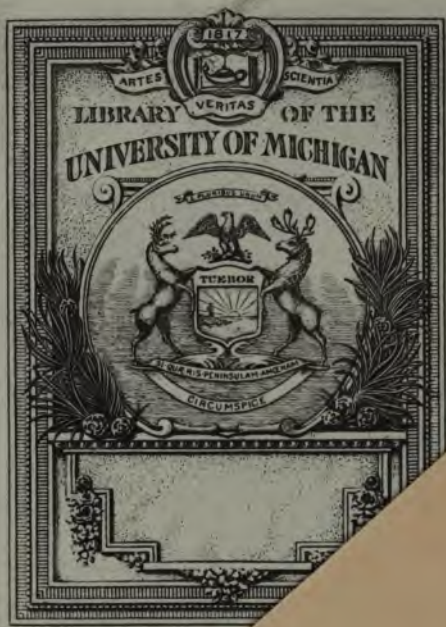
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